

# Writing the 9/11 Decade

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requirements of the degree of PhD**

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**Declaration of Authorship**

I Charlie Lee-Potter hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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### Charlie Lee-Potter, *Writing the 9/11 Decade*

Novelists have struggled to find forms of expression that would allow them to register the post-9/11 landscape. This thesis examines their tentative and sometimes faltering attempts to establish a critical distance from and create a convincing narrative and metaphorical lexicon for the historical, political and psychological realities of the terrorist attacks. I suggest that they have, at times, been distracted by the populist rhetoric of journalistic expression, by a retreat to American exceptionalism and by the demand for an immediate response.

The Bush administration's statement that the state and politicians 'create our own reality' served to reinforce the difficulties that novelists faced in creating their own. Against the background of public commentary post-9/11, and the politics of the subsequent 'War on Terror', the thesis considers the work of Richard Ford, Paul Auster, Kamila Shamsie, Nadeem Aslam, Don DeLillo, Mohsin Hamid and Amy Waldman. Using my own extended interviews with Ford, Waldman and Shamsie, the artist Eric Fischl, the journalist Kevin Marsh, and with the former Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Rowan Williams (who is also a 9/11 survivor), I consider the aims and *praxis* of novelists working within a variety of traditions, from Ford's realism and Auster's metafiction to the post-colonial perspectives of Hamid and Aslam, and, finally, the end-of-decade reflections of Waldman.

My conclusion is that novelists are, finally, edging closer to methodologies adequate to the challenges of the post-9/11 world. Ford's admission that writers do not 'have an exact human vocabulary for the loss of a city' has given way to a new surety that the narrative and visual arts can define the unimaginable in important and expressive ways.

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## INTRODUCTION

The decade that passed after the attacks of 9/11 was politically, ideologically and militarily fraught. The immediate shock and paranoia that the attacks spawned in the United States, produced, in turn, an unusually symbiotic and cohesive international response; a response characterized aptly by the hand-wringing of a leading British politician, who said that ‘it seems almost inevitable that there will be some sort of military response at some point – although at the moment we do not know where, when, or against whom.’<sup>1</sup> That retaliatory paradigm was extended in George W. Bush’s binary proclamation that ‘either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.’<sup>2</sup> In the United States the acquiescence of the news media was summed up vividly by TV news anchor Dan Rather’s admission that ‘it starts with a feeling of patriotism within one’s self. It carries through with the knowledge that the country as a whole and for all of the right reasons, felt and continues to feel this surge of patriotism within themselves. And one finds oneself saying, “I know the right question but you know what, this is not exactly the right time to ask it.”’<sup>3</sup> Self-censorship evolved into what US journalist and author Norman Solomon called a form of news coverage that ‘is more akin to stenography for the movers and shakers in Washington.’<sup>4</sup> In similar vein, once the military offensive was launched in Afghanistan, Howard Zinn reported:

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Kennedy MP speaking in the House of Commons, 14 September 2001, *Hansard*: 14 September 2001  
<[http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200102/cmhansrd/vo010914/debtext/10914-02.htm#10914-02\\_spnew1](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200102/cmhansrd/vo010914/debtext/10914-02.htm#10914-02_spnew1)> [accessed 16 March 2013].

<sup>2</sup> George W Bush, *Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People*, 20 September 2001,  
<<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>>  
[accessed 16 March 2013].

<sup>3</sup> Dan Rather interviewed by Madeleine Holt, *BBC Newsnight*, 6 June 2002,  
<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/archive/2029634.stm>>  
[accessed 15 March 2013].

<sup>4</sup> Norman Solomon, ‘Foreword’, in *No Questions Asked: News Coverage since 9/11*, by Lisa Finnegan (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), p. xiii.



The head of the television network CNN, Walter Isaacson, sent a memo to his staff saying that images of civilian casualties should be accompanied with an explanation that this was retaliation for the harboring of terrorists. "It seems perverse to focus too much on the casualties or hardships in Afghanistan", he said.<sup>5</sup>

Within the United States a key consequence of the sudden political solidarity was, against the odds, the re-election of George W Bush in 2004, voted back in by a newly risk-averse nation who, since 9/11, had been seemingly desperate to forge a sense of continuity and stability in the face of catastrophe. Before Bush's re-election the journalist and former Republican speechwriter Peggy Noonan wrote approvingly and bathetically that she could not help when she looked at him but think of 'earnest Clark Kent moving, at the moment of maximum danger, to shed his suit, tear open his shirt and reveal the big "S" on his chest.'<sup>6</sup> Susan Faludi, who also pointed to Noonan's invocation of Superman, reported that in the days after the attacks she was called numerous times by journalists seeking to take the narrative in a particular direction, 'among them a *New York Times* reporter researching an article on the "return of the manly man" and a *New York Observer* writer seeking comment on "the trend" of women "becoming more feminine after 9/11." By which, as she made clear, she meant *less feminist*. Women were going to regret their "independence," she said, and devote themselves to "baking cookies" and finding husbands to "take care of them."<sup>7</sup>

Thus the rhetorical default was glibly set and not just in the United States. The former editor of BBC Radio 4's Today programme, Kevin Marsh, declared that daily journalism failed in Britain too. Marsh, who later became editor of the BBC College of Journalism, has consistently said that 9/11 and its political consequences reinforced journalists' dislike for intellectual depth and complexity:

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<sup>5</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-present, Third Edition* (1980; Harlow: Pearson Education, 2003), pp. 679-680.

<sup>6</sup> Peggy Noonan, 'The Right Man', *Wall Street Journal*, 30 January 2003, <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB1043895876926710064.html>> [accessed 18 March 2013].

<sup>7</sup> Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream* (2007; London: Atlantic Books), 2008, p. 20.

Journalism – even that from non-jingoistic, xenophobic quarters – was hugely influenced by the political consensus in the face of the 9/11 attacks. Both that consensus and the speed at which events careered towards war. And those failings are the usual ones; daily journalism's aversion to complexity; its centripetal tendency, dragging the apparent plurality of multiple outlets towards common framings; its inevitable preference for the striking event over the telling trend; and its eternal excuse – we're just telling stories.<sup>8</sup>

Journalists were not the only ones to suffer from the 'centripetal tendency'. In the early days after the attacks, many novelists rehearsed their fictional responses by writing essays and fragments of prose for the newspapers and magazines that queued up to commission salving words. An analysis of that non-fiction demonstrates that it, too, suffers from the 'aversion to complexity' and tendency to reach for the 'common framings' that Marsh identified, as I will go on to show. For those who attempted to respond – Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, Richard Ford, Paul Auster and Don DeLillo amongst them – their themes were as curiously symbiotic as the international community's had been on its more macro scale: to paraphrase perhaps a little harshly, each of them fumbled in one form or another for the nostrum that 'in the end, love will overcome'. Unconvincing at the time and finally rejected by each of them in their novelistic responses some years later, nevertheless the 'love' solution has persisted as the grand narrative for some writers of 9/11 fiction, such as Karen Kingsbury, for whom a restorative and fortifying exceptionalist doctrine, often underpinned by Christianity, has been their stirring rejoinder to terrorist assault.

At the other end of what we might call the 'love-spectrum' there resides a more literary response. While it avoids explicit exceptionalism, it still relies for its heft on the nourishing notion of consolation. It is the lyrical realism eschewed by Zadie Smith in the context of Joseph O'Neill's 9/11 novel *Netherland*, which, she says:

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<sup>8</sup> Kevin Marsh, 'Afghanistan, Truth and the Unexamined War', in *Afghanistan, War and the Media: Deadlines and Frontlines*, ed. By Richard Lance Keeble and John Mair (Bury St Edmunds: Arima Publishing, 2010), p. 81.

knows the fears and weaknesses of its readers. What is disappointing is how much it indulges them. Out of a familiar love, like a lapsed High Anglican, *Netherland* hangs on to the rituals and garments of transcendence, though it well knows they are empty. In its final saccharine image (Hans and his family, reunited on the mandala of the London Eye Ferris wheel), *Netherland* demonstrates its sly ability to have its metaphysical cake and eat it, too. . .<sup>9</sup>

Smith's remonstrations against the indulgences of O'Neill had at their heart the objection that to wreath prose in metaphorical excess is to console, when no such consolation should be proffered. As she phrased it: 'There was the chance to let the towers be what they were: towers. But they were covered in literary language when they fell, and they continue to be here.' That tension between mimesis and metaphor is one of the dialogic tussles that I examine in this work, along with the broader contest set up by Smith between 'misguided ideologists' such as DeLillo whose rejoinder to realism has been a 'fascinating failure' that 'lacked heart', and lyrical realists such as O'Neill whose work may be nothing more than the 'bedtime story that comforts us most.' Smith's assertion that *Netherland* is an 'anxious novel' because it is conscious of the literary struggle in which it is a combatant has fragments of truth in it, as does her definition of *Netherland* as a 'post-catastrophe novel, but the catastrophe isn't terror, it's Realism'.

To use Smith's word, I will define much of fiction's response to 9/11 as 'anxious' to a certain degree, certainly in the first decade. That is not to say that all novels fixate upon the means to be 'true' or 'real' or that they simply wring their hands in despair, but that they all wrestle with Iris Murdoch's evocation in *Against Dryness* of 'the consolations of form.'<sup>10</sup> Murdoch's distinction in was

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<sup>9</sup> Zadie Smith, 'Two Paths for the Novel', *New York Review of Books*, 20 November 2008,

<<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2008/nov/20/two-paths-for-the-novel/?pagination=false>> [accessed 18 March 2013].

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to David James of Queen Mary, University of London, for thoughts about the 'false consolations of form' in the context of Murdoch and Smith, in addition

between the 'crystalline' novel, (in other words the 'small, quasi-allegorical object portraying the human condition') and the 'journalistic' novel, the journalistic being the 'large shapeless quasi-documentary object, the degenerate descendant of the nineteenth-century novel, telling, with pale conventional characters, some straightforward story enlivened with empirical facts.'<sup>11</sup> It is a helpful distinction in the context of this work, since Murdoch identified the temptation that she saw for writers of both crystalline and journalistic novels, which still entraps the 9/11 novelist now: 'The temptation of art, a temptation to which every work of art yields except the greatest ones, is to console. The modern writer, [...] attempts to console us by myths or by stories.'<sup>12</sup> That drive to 'console' was characteristic of the earliest non-fiction experiments of those novelists who were asked to respond immediately to 9/11 in newspapers and magazines, as this work will go on to demonstrate.

While offering up the consolation myth immediately and apparently willingly, there was still the fraught ethical conundrum for all writers as to the 'ownership' of experience. Even if they *could* write about it, should they? For those people who escaped from the Towers or from the surrounding streets, there can be a deeply ingrained reluctance to look again at the events of that day. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams was taking part in a series of theological debates on September 11, in a building owned by Trinity Church only yards from the World Trade Center. He has rarely spoken publicly about his experiences. He published a short essay, 'Writing in the Dust', in 2002, and spoke to the BBC on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11, but beyond those statements he has chosen to remain silent. In an interview with me he tried to define why he has found it hard to speak and why he has encountered such difficulties in trying to read any fictional accounts of 9/11; this from a man who as Archbishop of Wales and then Archbishop of Canterbury<sup>13</sup> might be expected, like a major novelist, to have words adequate to any historical situation:

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to his journal article. David James, 'A Renaissance for the Crystalline Novel?', *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 53, no. 4 (Winter 2012), pp. 845-874.

<sup>11</sup> Iris Murdoch, 'Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch', in *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (London: Fontana, 1990), pp. 23-31.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Rowan Williams was elected Archbishop of Wales in December 1999 and as Archbishop of Canterbury in July 2002.

When you think of the visual images of 9/11, they are very, very hard to capture or to rework because they're so enormous and the actual sight of the plane going into the tower and bodies falling from the windows and dust clouds in the street... who has managed that? I find it very difficult to read any of the novels. It's a difficult question because it's just that the visual images do still bring back a moment I haven't really got words for, and having been close-ish to it, I think there's almost a resentment about people who're not so close to it finding words on my behalf. [...]<sup>14</sup>

The 9/11 novel is perhaps inevitably ensnared by competing dialectics, and here, Williams presents yet another one: the tensions between the direct and the indirect witness. He expresses the sentiment that there appear to be implicit gradations of entitlement to represent 9/11 artistically, because while everyone saw it, comparatively few witnessed it, in the sense of experiencing it first-hand. For the purposes of clarity I attempt to untangle the interwoven dialectics that so obfuscate the artistic rejoinder to 9/11, but of course an inevitable part of 9/11's complexity is that competing questions - the direct witness versus the spectator, the immediate response versus the considered, the literary versus the non-literary, commemoration versus memorialization, as well as fiction and its relation to historical record - present in multiple ways and often simultaneously. For Williams there was yet another layer of complexity. His and his colleagues' belief that they were unlikely to survive revealed a fundamental truth about the immediate experience of such a crisis that seems relevant to any artistic representation of 9/11 after the event. Williams found that, beyond the question of survival, there seemed very little to say:

I think we were rather assuming that we would be fortunate to live through this. [...] We prayed a bit together, being mostly clergy. There wasn't a lot to say. I do remember somebody saying as we bundled ourselves down the stairs towards the basement, 'Well, if we've got to die, this is quite a good group of people to be in company with'.<sup>15</sup>

The simple realization that 'there wasn't a lot to say' seems relevant to any

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<sup>14</sup> Dr Rowan Williams interviewed by Charlie Lee-Potter 3 April 2013.

<sup>15</sup> RW interviewed by CLP.

discussion about the appropriate lexicon to represent trauma, or indeed whether that trauma is representable at all. It is arguably a more astringent and economical definition of Zadie Smith's criticism that the Towers 'were covered in literary language when they fell...'<sup>16</sup> If a witness to the catastrophe (and one for whom nuanced and apposite language has always been so easy to find), found that words were redundant, what chance of success could there be for the spectator-novelist?

Initially, Williams and his colleagues sought refuge in the basement but it became increasingly difficult to breathe. One of them, Courtney Cowart, described what happened when they tried to escape. They emerged into a landscape where 'Sidewalks, streets, cars, windows, ledges are deep in lavender-grey ash. The crystalline blue sky of the early morning is bruised, purple-green. The smoke in the sky continues to partially obscure the sun. It strikes me how unnatural this painter's palette is. The colors are wrong; deeply unsettling. It feels like an alien planet.'<sup>17</sup> Just a few moments later the North Tower collapsed behind them:

The sound hammers on my brain. It is coming from the sky and from the ground. Above the decibels are so high the air is crackling. Below the ground is roaring and writhing like some mythical savage beast. The sound is bewildering because it is two noises coming from two directions. It feels like it might swallow us. [...] I see it barreling toward me 1,368 feet high. My mind is almost paralyzed, but not quite. I think in milliseconds. I think, 'When it gets to me I'll die or live. I have time for one more thought.'<sup>18</sup>

It is little wonder then that Williams expresses contempt for those novels that attempt to soothe and to resolve, the 'love-spectrum' texts, the Christian novels that proselytize, describing them with some passion as 'really horrible, *really* horrible actually. Novels ought never to be propaganda. They do have their philosophies. They just do. There are very few innocent novels in that sense.

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<sup>16</sup> Smith, 'Two Paths for the Novel'.

<sup>17</sup> Courtney Cowart, *An American Awakening: From Ground Zero to Katrina: The People We Are Free to Be* (New York: Seabury Books), 2008, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

But again the good novel is not one that leaves you with more conclusions, but with more room in your mind.<sup>19</sup> What therefore should, could the novelist do to define such an event as 9/11, while eschewing propaganda, avoiding resolution and resisting rhetorical excess? Given Williams' remark about 'resentment' at the audacity of those who did not witness and yet who try to write, should the event somehow, impossibly, be reserved only for those who experienced it directly? Perhaps it is appropriate that his response avoids resolution:

No, no. I just report a reaction that anyone involved in serious trauma must feel, even somebody let's say who has been recently bereaved, picking up a book on bereavement and saying 'How dare they? What has this book to do with me? This is my territory.' Holocaust literature is another monumentally significant area and I would guess that you would have some interest in exploring that too in a comparative way. But theory doesn't do the job in the end. With any traumatic experience, at some point you have to make it part of your own story and part of your own narrative. You've got to talk about it. I don't mean in a cheap, therapeutic, let-it-all-out way, I suppose that's why I wrote what I did in the months following, possibly too quickly. There were things that I just needed to say, put out there, and engage with. And as soon as you've done that you're admitting that it can be talked about, and if it can be talked about then other people will talk about it too. [...] it is quite risky. Because if you hold something to yourself, you know that it's safe and you're safe. It's locked up. But you also need it to be recognized, and you need acknowledgement. And if you go out looking for acknowledgement then you take a risk that something will be misrecognized, the risk that you yourself misrecognize what you've been talking about, that you've betrayed something. But that's the process you go through. I once met Elie Wiesel but I didn't quite have the nerve to ask him, 'How do you do it?' How do you write about this without somehow thinking that you've shrunk it?<sup>20</sup>

While lacking resolution, his response goes some way towards explaining why

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<sup>19</sup> RW interviewed by CLP.

<sup>20</sup> RW interviewed by CLP.

he has chosen to speak out now and why, on a larger scale, novelists may find 9/11 more 'speakable' as time elapses. However, in the shorter term his view that to write it runs the risk that 'you've shrunk it' is allied to the idea that if a traumatic event is described in its fullest detail and form, it will somehow attract the wrong kinds of investment and attention. In other words, there is yet another troublesome dialectic at play here: that between the responsible and the irresponsible spectator:

I'm always wary of what you might call trauma pornography. You read it because of the sense of being in touch with an extreme experience. It does get the adrenalin flowing in some ways. I'm very wary of that. Even your own text can work that way sometimes. I don't want to get excited by it. Let's be very blunt about this. If something like that happens in the world that we're in, it makes you interesting. 'Ooh you were *there*?' And I have to be very aware of that and I have to be very suspicious of it. [...] And there have been times when I have very deliberately backed off saying anything about it because I don't want to say 'Hey, look at me. I'm interesting, I was *there*.'<sup>21</sup>

As this work will go on to suggest, it is the particular difficulty posed by the scale of the event and the public nature of the catastrophe that makes it so perplexing for the novelist to contain. Implicitly invoking Jean Baudrillard's definition of the 'hyperreal', Williams defines the event of 9/11 as almost beyond the scope of the novel:

with the massive, world-altering, boundary-challenging experiences, whether it be the life and death of Jesus or the Holocaust or a modern trauma like 9/11, it's almost like saying 'well how much bigger, how much deeper do you want things to be?' The event itself almost does the work of the great novel for you, because it pushes the boundaries. It deepens things. It creates places in you that weren't there before. So isn't the novel just going to domesticate that a bit? [...] I once supervised a thesis years ago on Holocaust fiction and one interesting point made by my very gifted student was that if you look at some Jewish writing, like that of

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<sup>21</sup> RW interviewed by CLP.



Isaac Bashevis Singer, you have fictions about life in the *shtetl* before, and fictions about New York Jewry after, and in the middle you have this great silence which people will not really refer to and that in itself is a very powerful fictionalizer, [...] the empty space.<sup>22</sup>

The idea of ‘the empty space’ is, in some respects, a counsel of despair for the novelist seeking the vocabulary to write 9/11: for the writer, conceding that the most powerful way to confront 9/11 is to leave a ‘great silence’ is, potentially, to admit defeat. However, as Richard Gray points out, ‘even in denying or dismissing the tools of the trade, [the writer] is using them. [...] The solution is either to surrender – which is not really a viable option, practically or emotionally – or to go on writing, continue trying to find some way of saying the unsayable.’<sup>23</sup>

In what follows, I address a variety of responses to the challenge of ‘saying the unsayable’, all of them written from different political and aesthetic positions. The particular conundrum of the ‘great silence’ that Rowan Williams identifies would seem familiar to my first example: Richard Ford, the neo-realist novelist who has offered perhaps the most closely-observed account of American life since the 1980s. In Chapter 1, using an extended interview I conducted with Ford, I examine the particular conundrum he faced in trying to evaluate 9/11 in fiction. There is good reason to assume that Ford could not bring himself to do it, because after all where is his text? However, I demonstrate that he has in fact written a 9/11 novel, but written from an angle so oblique that it is at times hard to recognize. In my interview Ford concedes that he found it impossible to address 9/11 directly but that his effort to define it by other means has gone largely unobserved by his readers.

My second chapter provides an analysis of what I term the ‘narratives of retrogenesis’ by Mohsin Hamid, Don DeLillo and Jonathan Safran Foer, in which their fictions attempt to subsume the trauma of 9/11 by regressing in time. Chapter 3 provides an examination of Paul Auster’s perplexed and at times

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), p. 54.

perplexing counterfactual response, an engagement that I term ‘hyperparallel’, using the hyperbolic geometrical term that combines both the notion of the parallel and yet the divergent. (It is a coincidence, although perhaps a fortuitous one, that the hyperparallel invokes once again the notion of the hyperreal.) My fourth chapter concerns the Pakistani Anglophone novels of Kamila Shamsie and Nadeem Aslam, whose reactions to 9/11 have been to condemn the neurotic fixation on the day itself and to focus instead on 9/11’s historical context. Aslam’s contention is that ‘history is the third parent’; in other words 9/11 was one of the perhaps inevitable consequences of history’s long twentieth-century shadow. Both he and Shamsie point to the failure of political and journalistic discourse to anticipate 9/11 and the woeful lack of understanding, particularly in the United States, of 9/11’s place in history. The approach they decry has been defined memorably by novelist Will Self as journalism’s fixation on a ‘continuous now’:

Does it drive people towards a deeper understanding or interest in the past? Even the very recent past, which you might think is a much more useful and fruitful ground for understanding the nature of events; to look back over the last week or month or even few years to try to understand what is happening now. I don’t think so. In fact where we exist in news is in a kind of continuous now. It’s even begun to project out in front of the present to schlap up the immediate future as well and that is why news has started to take on a character of same-iness and banality.<sup>24</sup>

In this work I examine the efforts made by novelists, some more successfully than others, to escape from an endless present tense in which the past has been framed and memorialized in the present and in which it will continue to provide an inescapably predetermined future. What novelists have been edging their way towards is finding a means to memorialize, outside the constraints of the continuous present. It is an approach that has been defined by Richard Crownshaw as:

remembering what a better future might look like; that is, different from

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<sup>24</sup> Will Self interviewed on *Making News: The Endless Cycle*, BBC Radio 4, 9 April 2013.

the remembered catastrophes of the past and their legacies in the present. A remembrance of what the future should look like allows a critical distance on the present and its historicization.<sup>25</sup>

If, as Marsh and Self conclude, journalism has produced a temporal distortion in which we are always enduring the 'now', a now that has been incorrectly drawn from a wrongly framed past, the likelihood is that the future will continue to be simply a part of that flawed now. As Crownshaw suggests, the false framing of the past can produce not memorialization, but merely commemoration:

Commemoration results from the divorce of history from memory, the disarticulation of their interdependence, the unmooring of history from the particularities of witnessing and testimony. It is these particularities that obstruct commemoration's desire to conclude upon past events.<sup>26</sup>

Commemoration is expressly what Shamsie and Aslam have been striving to avoid in their work; their rejection both of commemoration and the 'continuous now' is further illuminated by Paul Connerton's analysis of the commemorative<sup>27</sup> in the context of Paul de Man's idea that 'invites us to consider "the idea of modernity" as consisting in "a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that would be called a true present"'.<sup>28</sup> In an interview I conducted with Shamsie she highlights both the consequences of approaching events as 'continuous now' or 'true present' and of refusing to place 9/11 in historical context, as well as the particular difficulties of writing fictionally about Guantanamo where the situation is still evolving and remains unclear.

The final chapter focuses on the work of journalist turned novelist Amy Waldman, whose work published almost ten years to the day since 9/11 seeks

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<sup>25</sup> Richard Crownshaw, 'Introduction', *The Future of Memory*, ed. Richard Crownshaw, Jane Kilby and Antony Rowland (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Crownshaw, *The Future of Memory*, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 61.

<sup>28</sup> Paul de Man, 'Literary History and Literary Modernity', *Daedalus*, vol. 99, no. 2, *Theory in Humanistic Studies* (Spring 1970), pp. 384-404, pp. 388-389.

a new temporal drive by forcing the fictional response forwards rather than nostalgically or paranoically back, combining both context and progressive momentum. Again, in an interview, she explains to me the tensions she sees between the so-called arbiters of fact: journalists, artists, politicians and historians. Her novel is the most journalistic in its rhetoric of all the novels that I examine, while eschewing the 'love-spectrum', any form of retrogenesis or temporal avoidance tactics. However, whether her approach guides the novel away from the consolation dialectic, as defined by Crownshaw, or the exceptionalist mode defined as so inadequate to the task by Michael Rothberg, are questions that I will consider.

Fiction and its relation to history, the literary and its relation to the non-literary, the immediate versus the considered response, are dialectics that I examine in this work, demonstrating how the work of a succession of novelists in the decade after 9/11 has evolved from their earlier instinctive and fragile non-fiction responses to the attacks. In my interview, Kevin Marsh suggested that the flaws in writers' immediate responses both to 9/11 and to the ensuing military action in Afghanistan, are consequential to the later artistic response; the creation by writers of a immediate 'grand narrative' that had been both deliberately and at times tacitly agreed between them, set a particular version of events in stone:

It's unarguably the case that everyone involved in that public discourse failed. Now, there were people missing from that discourse – novelists, poets, dramatists, a lot of people. Keats called poets the 'unacknowledged legislators'. So a lot of people were missing. They came piling in later. But by then we'd fixed the key idea which was that 'being in Afghanistan is a good thing.' The fact that we're still there twelve years later, three times as long as the European War to D Day, is extraordinary. All those phrases that come in like 'mission creep' – it isn't mission creep because there was no mission in the first place. Nobody knew why we were doing it, so it was completely unexamined.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Kevin Marsh interviewed by Charlie Lee-Potter, 8 March 2013.

Marsh has defined that difficulty of the 'fixed' idea as a craving amongst those who commissioned and published such writing for 'common framings'; a craving that made it difficult for voices of dissent to be heard in the immediate discourse that followed 9/11:

if you'd stepped right outside the framings you wouldn't have been heard. It might have been dropped or if it had gone out, it wouldn't have registered at all. This is the thing about audiences. They need to hear or to see or to read things that allow them to have had a running start first. If you'd come at *Enduring Freedom*<sup>30</sup>, the Afghan mission, entirely from the point of view of the confused peasant who didn't know that he or she wanted the country liberating, maybe people would have thought it was vaguely interesting but they wouldn't really have heard it.... You can do that politically in black and white terms of either being 'right' or being on the side of the bastards, but it's not just that it wasn't in the discourse; you couldn't actually even *put* it there. And if you did, no one would hear it.<sup>31</sup>

Novelists, responding later, were initially encumbered by the double burden of the legacy of such 'common framings', as well as the neurotic inability to find the words to define what they saw. Ford, in a piece of non-fiction that combined responses to both 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, admitted that he 'lacked the words', conceding that 'we still do not have an exact human vocabulary for the loss of a city.'<sup>32</sup> Notable attempts to fictionalize 9/11 without relying on words alone include the typographical experimentation indulged in by Foer, outlined in Chapter 2, or temporal adjustment strategies examined in Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

Philip Metres, in his poetry collection *Abu Ghraib Arias*, published ten years after 9/11, tried a more literal metaphorization of trauma. He attempted to find a bridge between historical record and artistic expression, by drawing on news reports transmuted into redacted fragments, with occasional words or

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<sup>30</sup> The name coined by the U.S. government for the war in Afghanistan

<sup>31</sup> KM interviewed by CLP.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Ford, 'Elegy for My City', *Observer*, 4 September 2005, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/sep/04/hurricanekatrina.features> [accessed 13 March 2013].

sometimes whole lines obscured by an imagined censor's black pen. The cover of the collection was made of 'combat paper', or recycled military uniforms, by Chris Arendt, an army veteran who served at Guantanamo Bay. There was a synchronicity to the endeavour: the 'combat paper' project was a papermaking workshop that encourages veterans to use their own uniforms in the process. According to the project's founders, the uniforms are 'cut up, beaten into a pulp and formed into sheets of paper. Participants use the transformative process of papermaking to reclaim their uniforms as art and express their experiences with the military.'<sup>33</sup> There is a defensive fixation here on objectifying the word, the page, the cover, while exploring the therapeutic value of the book-making process. The insistence that the uniforms should be 'beaten to a pulp' would suggest that the process of creating *Abu Ghraib Arias* is as much about therapeutic retaliation against a perceived aggressor as it is about literature. The news reports, the redactions, the recycled uniforms, even the revelation that Arendt spent precisely fifteen months, 'the length of a modern Army deployment'<sup>34</sup> collecting stories as a homeless veteran, hint at a neurotic fixation on saying more than language can. It is an exhaustive, even exhausting, attempt that ultimately struggles to find itself adequate to the task.

Writers were not the only artists who struggled to find the means to express what they had seen. The German painter Gerhard Richter, who was on a flight from Cologne to New York on September 11 and was diverted to Canada, attempted to depict on canvas the moment that the second plane hit the World Trade Center, calling his work simply *September*. The artist was born in Dresden in 1932 and so has always been immersed in the realities and consequences of the 'loss of a city'. After 9/11 he took for his inspiration a photograph of the second plane's moment of impact, but like so many other artists, he found the images problematic:

The picture I used for this painting was very beautiful, with flames in red and orange and yellow, and wonderful. And this was a problem. Of

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<sup>33</sup> The Combat Paper Project  
<http://www.combatpaper.org/index.html>  
 [accessed 15 March 2013].

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

course I painted it first in full colour, and then I had to slowly destroy it. And I made it banal. It doesn't tell much. It shows more the impossibility to say something about this disaster.<sup>35</sup>

It may have been the 'impossibility' of saying 'something about this disaster' and yet Robert Storr, in his essay about Richter's painting, argues that the artist's 'blurring of the explosion in the South Tower places gratification of any desire to see and thereby seize death pictorially beyond the viewer's reach. It is painting's rejoinder to a photographic myth; painting's discretion counteracting the camera's voyeurism.'<sup>36</sup> The uncanny effect of Richter's refusal to allow the 'beautiful' red, orange and yellow flames to remain on the canvas was to render it more specifically evocative of the event. He scraped away at the brightly coloured paint he had layered over the painting, signalling the impossibility of representing the event; and yet the effect of the grey, black and white smudges and scars produced by his scraping is evocative of the planes themselves. There is an assurance, an assertiveness about the 'impossibility' of saying something in the hands of Richter that is lacking in the uncharacteristically agonized neuroticism of Auster, DeLillo and Foer. However, Richter's assertive power to somehow turn his failure to express 9/11 into an intellectual and aesthetic strength rather than weakness has not always been shared by his fellow painters, sculptors and architects. In Chapters 2 and 5 I examine the opprobrium directed at Eric Fischl and Maya Lin in their attempts to memorialize and bear witness to the traumas of 9/11 and the Vietnam War respectively.

The representation of 9/11 has been a vexed and fractured story. In serious literary terms it has tended to wrestle with temporal conundrums involving the turning back of time, stopping time dead or attempting to envisage counter-historical narratives, an implicit rejection of the 'continuous now'. However, some novelists have marooned themselves in the artistically futile territory of what could be called the 'missing person' scenario in which 9/11 acts as a kind of lumbering *deus ex machina*, arranging for people to vanish or reappear, such

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<sup>35</sup> Gerhard Richter in conversation with Nicholas Serota. Extract taken from recording for the Tate Channel and reprinted in *Tate Guide*, December 2011-January 2012, p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Storr, *September: A History Painting by Gerhard Richter* (London: Tate Publishing, 2010), p. 52.

as Clare Messud's *The Emperor's Children*, which allows a character to disappear, and Jay McInerney's *The Good Life*, in which 9/11 becomes the means by which two unlikely characters meet and in which 'apocalypse and atrocity yielded to adultery and conversation'.<sup>37</sup> Their clumsy syncretic attempts to bind public trauma with private missing persons have produced a kind of hybrid fiction that is part memorialization, part sleight of hand, part soap opera. Other novelists have tried what might be called the reflex angle of making glancing reference to 9/11 and swiftly diverting their attention elsewhere, such as Audrey Niffenegger in *The Time Traveller's Wife*, where the protagonist's 'chrono displacement disorder' allowed him to know 9/11 was imminent but nevertheless choose not to stop it. Niffenegger admitted that 9/11 occurred as she was completing the novel and although she did not want to include it, she felt that 'you have this gigantic thing and if you don't at least nod at it, it's going to seem glaring in its absence'.<sup>38</sup> (Niffenegger's hesitant 'nod' is in opposition to DeLillo's assertive rejection of the reflex angle: 'I didn't want to write a novel in which the attacks occur over the character's right shoulder'.<sup>39</sup>) Lorrie Moore's *A Gate at the Stairs* suffers from the same misguided compulsion to 'nod at' 9/11, while Nick McDonell relegates 9/11 to a curious subplot in *The Third Brother* in which someone does not die. Ken Kalfus *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* is particularly unsuccessful, deploying 9/11 as a mechanism to arrange for a divorcing couple to celebrate in expectation of each other's death in the South Tower and on one of the hijacked planes. It is no surprise to learn that each of them is disappointed.

Richard Gray, citing Messud's, Kalfus', McInerney's and DeLillo's 9/11 texts, defined them as works in which the 'crisis is, in every sense of the word, domesticated. [...] all life here is personal; cataclysmic public events are measured purely and simply in terms of their impact on the emotional

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<sup>37</sup> Adam Mars-Jones, 'As his world came tumbling down', *Observer*, 13 May 2007 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/may/13/fiction.dondelillo>> [accessed 15 May 2013].

<sup>38</sup> Audrey Niffenegger interviewed by Veronica Bond, December 2003 [http://www.bookslut.com/features/2003\\_12\\_001158.php](http://www.bookslut.com/features/2003_12_001158.php) [accessed 14 March 2013].

<sup>39</sup> Don DeLillo, interviewed by Mark Binelli, 'Intensity of a Plot', *Guernica*, 17 July 2007, <[http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/intensity\\_of\\_a\\_plot/](http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/intensity_of_a_plot/)> [accessed 15 May 2013].



entanglements of their protagonists.<sup>40</sup> Gray observed that novelists had emphasized the 'preliminary stages of trauma: the sense of those events as a kind of historical and experiential abyss, a yawning and possibly unbridgeable gap between before and after.'<sup>41</sup> (This definition resonates with the 'empty space' described by Rowan Williams.) However, Gray suggested possible strategies to bridge that 'gap'. In recommending that 'some kind of alteration of imaginative structures is required to register the contemporary crisis', he proffered a 'deterritorialized' approach, in which novelists can respond to the challenge of 'new forms of otherness that are at best virulently critical and at worst obscenely violent' by placing themselves at the heart of those conflicts and, through their writing, 'by means of a mixture of voices and a free play of languages and even genres, they can represent the reality of their culture as multiple, complex, and internally antagonistic.'<sup>42</sup>

It is important to note, here, one of the key critical debates about the future of the 9/11 novel. While Smith objected to the way in which, as she saw it, O'Neill attempted to indulge the reader, Michael Rothberg, responding to Gray's notion of deterritorialization, detected in *Netherland* not the empty 'garments of transcendence' or the false lure of 'domestic' fiction, but a 'vision of a deterritorialized America', in which lies 'the ethics of the immigrant encounter.'<sup>43</sup> While Gray recommended a fictional response to 9/11 that opened up the homeland to the immigrant, Rothberg suggested that we need 'a fiction of international relations and extraterritorial citizenship.'<sup>44</sup> Congratulating Gray for demonstrating that although 'American novelists have [...] announced the dawn of a new era following the attacks on New York and Washington D.C., the *form* of their works does not bear witness to fundamental change'<sup>45</sup>, nevertheless Rothberg argued that Gray's remedy of deterritorialization was not 'entirely sufficient'. He suggested, instead, a move away from the homeland altogether,

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<sup>40</sup> Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), p. 30.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Rothberg, 'A Failure of the Imagination: Diagnosing the Post-9/11 Novel: A Response to Richard Gray', *American Literary History*, vol. 21, no. 1 (Spring 2009), pp. 152-158, p. 157.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>45</sup> Gray, p. 51.

by seeking 'a centrifugal literature of extraterritoriality' in which the 9/11 novel should provide 'cognitive maps that imagine how US citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, both for Americans and for others.'<sup>46</sup> This 'extraterritorial' approach is addressed in Chapter 4, where I consider 9/11 novels written by Anglophone novelists from Pakistan.

Gray's concern about novelists' fixation on the 'preliminary stages of trauma' is important, in that he suggested that the writer is acting 'as both victim and witness'<sup>47</sup>. Witnesses they may be, and yet few novelists have attempted to describe the actuality of the day itself in their later fiction. (DeLillo's fictional attempt in *Falling Man* has a neurotic tone and is discussed in Chapter 2.) There appears to be something oddly coagulating about the specifics of 9/11 that has clotted the attempts by fiction writers to grasp them. However, some tried in their early non-fiction. Auster, for example, wrote a short piece of prose on the day itself, a weak and flawed fragment, that I consider in Chapter 3. Martin Amis, in his essay written immediately after 9/11, reached for the lexically and intellectually impoverished idea of the nightmare/dreamscape in which an event becomes the substance of film, although he attempted to have it both ways by saying that it is 'already trite but stringently necessary to emphasize that such a *mise en scene* would have embarrassed a studio executive's storyboard or thriller-writer's notebook.'<sup>48</sup> Amis conceded that an 'unusual number of novelists chose to write some journalism about September 11', while Jonathan Lethem said that 'most of the novelists in New York were asked by one magazine or another to write something, and to me it seems our voices, at that moment, blended into one vast impotent scream'<sup>49</sup>. Indeed, he admitted that his own attempt written on September 12 and 13 was 'a pale scream of protest, nothing more'<sup>50</sup> Amis explained his and his fellow novelists' choice to go 'into newsprint' because they were 'being obliged to snap out of their solipsistic daydreams: to attend, as best they could, to the facts of life':

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<sup>46</sup> Rothberg, p. 158.

<sup>47</sup> Gray, p. 24.

<sup>48</sup> Martin Amis, 'The Second Plane', *The Second Plane* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), pp. 3-4.

<sup>49</sup> Jonathan Lethem, 'To My Italian Friends', *The Ecstasy of Influence* (2012; London: Jonathan Cape, 2013), p. 227.

<sup>50</sup> Lethem, *The Ecstasy of Influence*, p. 227.

For politics – once defined as ‘what’s going on’ – suddenly filled the sky. True, novelists don’t normally write about what’s going on; they write about what’s not going on. Yet the worlds so created aspire to pattern and shape and moral point. A novel is a rational undertaking; it is reason at play, perhaps, but it is still reason.

September 11 was a day of de-Enlightenment.<sup>51</sup>

Aside from snapping out of their daydreams, Amis explained all their journalistic endeavours as ‘playing for time’<sup>52</sup>, apparently suggesting that responding to 9/11 as an essayist was somehow the means by which the ‘real’ and difficult task of the novelist could be temporarily avoided. Marsh, who as a BBC programme editor frequently commissioned writers of fiction to define or to comment on the news of the day, takes a different view on this, seeing it not as a means of ‘playing for time’ but of being entrapped by the *lack* of time:

The right thing for McEwan to have said when asked to do that was no. Because when journalism crashes into fiction, or a journalist crashes into a novelist, one thing disappears from the equation which is time. Surely the one thing that any novelist or artist needs is time, because you need that reflection, to go outside the concepts that you’re happy with, familiar with, comfortable with. You need to step outside those and when you invite McEwan to write a piece or Rushdie, you’re almost saying ‘we’d like you to be a novelist, but we’re going to take away your most important tool which is time’.<sup>53</sup>

There can be no doubt about the particular demands that 9/11 placed on all writers, whether of fiction or non-fiction. Marsh, who presided over PM, one of the BBC’s flagship radio news programmes, on 11 September 2001, recalls a journalistic crisis unlike any before or since in his twenty seven years of editing. It is worth citing his comments at length because they set in context perfectly

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<sup>51</sup> Amis, ‘The Voice of the Lonely Crowd’, *The Second Plane*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>53</sup> KM interviewed by CLP.

the resounding lacuna at the heart of all initial attempts to define 9/11 in words. What was the vocabulary supposed to be? Marsh's account takes on a novelistic intensity and is worth treating as a fragment of literature:

It was one of those rare things that almost broke the system. Because at one level you're thinking, well we need a few clips here and we need someone who's on the scene there – at that level you could deal with it. But I very definitely got the sense in that first hour between 4pm and 5pm, when we went live on Radio 4, we didn't know how to cope with it. And there wasn't a framework, wasn't a conceptual framework to fit this into. We even had doubts – is this as big as we're thinking it is? It was weird... There was a real level of uncertainty. To some extent you mask that, because you're chucking things on air, so in a sense the mechanics of it masked it, but in terms of making sense of it all, or even making a narrative out of it, or a semi-narrative or finding bits of narrative. Thinking about that metaphor of the dream, you know when you have those very vivid dreams when lots of very realistic scenes happen and your dreaming mind can link them, but when you wake up and remember it you can't think for the life of you what it was. It was a bit like that. It's probably because of that feeling that as a journalist you should be able to make sense of it, you should be able to construct a narrative. And just physically there was an awful lot of head shaking. People were moving very slowly, it was a very strange afternoon. You would expect everyone to be rushing about, but everyone was going very slowly. There was almost a feeling that 'if I walk too fast I might upset things': a very, very weird atmosphere. And trying to work towards the headlines at 5 and 6 o'clock when you do have to say something resounding it was almost impossible actually, almost impossible. At 6pm the format kicked in: 'there has been a terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York and on the Pentagon in Washington'. So there was a format for that, a framework for that. But then, what the fuck does that mean? It was almost as if anything you could say couldn't explain it. Because that doesn't explain it, does it?<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Marsh's description of how the day evolved runs counter to Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin's suggestion that familiarization eventually comes via endless repetition. Their view is that 'the default mode of both continuous and extended and even the more punctual (bulletins) television news coverage is repetition. "Recognition" and even "familiarity" actually sit with novelty, immediacy and surprise as news values.'<sup>55</sup> However, this did not seem possible either in the first responses to 9/11 or even subsequently, because 9/11 could never be 'familiar' enough for Hoskins and O'Loughlin's paradigm to work. Repetition did not help either; indeed, as touched on in Chapter 1, orders were finally given to television news networks to avoid repeated use of footage of the planes flying into the World Trade Center as somehow unseemly and offensive.

Part of the failure to 'explain' 9/11 came too from flaws in the narrative, those flaws sometimes accidental and sometimes placed deliberately for political, military or ideological purposes. Colonel Richard Iron, who served in the British Army in Iraq, described to me the military's routine use of the deliberate flaw in the narrative.<sup>56</sup> He revealed the instructions that he and his colleagues were given by both senior army figures and politicians that, when speaking to the media about the conflicts, they must 'always get the narrative right'. However, in Iraq post-2003, Colonel Iron started briefing people about what he saw as the renewed strength of insurgents. The official response was swift. 'I was ordered to stop because it did not fit the British Policy Narrative'. He added that:

the government has always tried to control the narrative. The narrative was that we were there to liberate Iraq from Saddam and we wouldn't need to do much afterwards. Once we'd given them their liberty, they, [the Iraqis] would sort it out. This narrative denied the possibility of alternative truths. It was a long time after Shia militias started their insurgency that anyone could come out and say it was an insurgency, because it didn't fit the narrative... There was self-censorship too... It had

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<sup>55</sup> Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin, *War and Media: The Emergence of Diffused War* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 22.

<sup>56</sup> Colonel Richard Iron interviewed by CLP on 11 August 2010. Colonel Iron left the British Army in 2012.

a very dramatic effect on the narrative. Journalists were being given the same narrative in Basra and Whitehall. It was very pervasive. It was only when people got wild cards like me that they heard the truth.<sup>57</sup>

On the vexed subject of journalist embeds, the means by which reporters were supposed to be able to assess the reality of military engagement on the ground, Colonel Iron said simply: 'The Army has done embedding very well. Every journalist falls in love with their unit...It's hugely positive for the Army.' Telling the 'right' narrative was as prevalent in the United States as Iron suggests it was in Britain. In July 2002, referring to the existence or otherwise of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, the former head of the British Secret Intelligence Service M16, Sir Richard Dearlove, told government ministers that in the United States 'intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy'.<sup>58</sup> The deliberate, varied obfuscation of the facts is examined in various guises in Chapters 1, 4 and 5.

The way in which the narrative fell into line behind political and military expediency is, of course, related to the 'common framings' of news coverage that Kevin Marsh complained of. However there is an added dimension to the idea of the 'common framing' that has its roots in the unprecedented nature of the news coverage of 9/11, with consequences for fiction. I suggested to Marsh that 9/11 formed in a sense the first 'perfect' news event in that it occurred on live television throughout the world. In some ways it did not need writers' interventions in order to be delivered to the audience and signalled a reduction in the power of the writer as mediator, in inverse proportion to the gathering strength of the mere observer:

In 1991 when CNN was just getting a foothold, the night the bombing starts you have Peter Arnett and Bernard Shaw, a map of Iraq and pictures of the two guys on the telephone describing what's happening... real eyewitness reporting, journalists bearing witness. Spool forward

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<sup>57</sup> Col. RI interviewed by CLP.

<sup>58</sup> Comments by Sir Richard Dearlove quoted in what is known as the 'Downing Street memo', a secret meeting on 23 July 2002 between government, intelligence and defence personnel.

twelve years to 'Shock and Awe' and there were no reporters at all. What you had was a series of cameras scanning the Baghdad skyline, the booms, the bangs. What is good about that? Well you're witnessing it for yourselves, rather like 9/11. You're in the news story. You're watching it happen. The downside is that you've got no one bearing witness, telling you what you can't see, no expertise telling you what *isn't* happening. No journalistic input. 9/11 as the first 'perfect' news event absolutely puts the finger on it. Because if you now look at the news priorities of the BBC it's to get news cameras there to *show* you. It's not to get a reporter there anymore. The reporter comes second. And that is now the expectation, that like 9/11, we will watch the thing for ourselves and take away from it whatever we take away from it.<sup>59</sup>

Theoretically, if everyone is a witness, it should be less easy for journalists to veil the event with their much-loved 'common framings'; however, in the case of 9/11 that did not appear to happen, in part because of the cravings I identified earlier for consolation, symbiosis and reassurance. James Curran, Professor of Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London, expressed it slightly differently. His view is that 9/11, the 'ultimate instant story', may have been universally witnessed but was universally misrepresented too, certainly in the West:

it's become almost a paradigm for how you should report the news. An urgent story that tells the unfolding of events, a story that narrates what is happening, an eyewitness report. All that is good but it can also produce misunderstanding. Looking back on it, the reporting of 9/11 encouraged a spasm of rage. It didn't produce a fully contextualized account of what could have given rise to 9/11 and what could be the consequences. The very focus on the tragedy and horror encouraged a visceral reaction, a reaction that in hindsight probably didn't serve the interests of the West.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> KM interviewed by CLP.

<sup>60</sup> James Curran interviewed on *Making News: The Endless Cycle*, BBC Radio 4, 9 April 2013.

The misrepresentation of the event has had additional consequences for fiction writers because the 'continuous now', the 'common framings' and the drive to occlude alternative points of view have made it arguably ever harder for them to find the vocabulary, the form to redefine what has already been seen. As Marsh concedes, there is a concomitant risk for writers and commentators that they will lose an element of mastery over their material. We are, he suggests, entering territory where an event, an idea, even a catastrophe can only really exist if it has been digitally captured on camera and catalogued:

It doesn't exist if it isn't there. So you have the expectation now, what's called the show-me tendency, which is 'I don't care what you thought when you saw that, I don't want you Mr. William Russell<sup>61</sup> to go to the Crimea. I don't want you to bear witness. I want you to get a camera there and show me so that I can see it.' The upside is that we all share the same initial experience, but like with 9/11 we then have different processing interpretations, we bring ourselves to it, our backgrounds, and that explains the differentiation...<sup>62</sup>

This work explicitly does not offer a comparative study of 9/11 journalism. Instead it uses the flaws and lacunae in fiction and non-fiction writers' immediate responses to the September 11 catastrophe both as context and starting point for a study of the 9/11 novel, beginning with the work of Richard Ford, the writer who was expected to write fictionally about 9/11 but who apparently found himself unable to. On the face of it his reluctance to do so may have seemed like uncharacteristic caution, or a defeated concession that he 'lacked the words'. Where does that place one of America's leading writers, if he found himself incapable of describing one of the nation's most destabilizing and shocking experiences? The work begins with Ford's perceived failure for two reasons. Firstly, because it sets the context for the struggles that all novelists have faced in the past decade; secondly, because, as this work will show, Ford did write his 9/11 novel finally. His text is by no means entirely successful and

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<sup>61</sup> William Russell was a reporter with *The Times* and is regarded as one of the first war correspondents of the modern era, known in particular for his reports from the Crimean War.

<sup>62</sup> KM interviewed by CLP.



indeed it has not even been universally recognized as a 9/11 novel, but like all the writers that I assess in the work, Ford finally found some words that wrenched the 9/11 experience out of the 'continuous now', while removing it from the 'missing person' narrative as well as from the hands of the peddlers of the falsely comforting 'love-spectrum'.

In my choice of novels to address I have sought out those that seem to confront the issues most cogently. My findings would suggest that there has been a gradual transition towards a more historical accommodation of the event, concluding with *The Submission*, a far more schematic work than its predecessors. A great deal of theoretical work has been done in this field, including important analyses of grief, memorialization, the domestic versus the domesticating and of temporality. While my methodology has not relied in any systematic way on trauma theory or the philosophical discussion of the 'event', I do bring in such ideas when they seem relevant to me as part of my investigation of writerly strategies and I have tried to introduce an approach to the material that combines both the temporal as well as the political, spatial and experiential. I have drawn invaluable insights from key texts on 9/11 fiction, which include Gray's *After the Fall*, in which he marks the capacity or otherwise of writers to engage in 'getting "into" history, to participate in its processes'<sup>63</sup>. This analysis is shared in part by *Literature after 9/11*, which makes connections between those texts that are 'involved in a broadly similar task: offering critiques of and challenges to political discourses that seek to simplify or fix the meaning of 9/11.'<sup>64</sup> Kristiaan Versluys' *Out of the Blue* focuses in large part upon language and whether 'words can be found that are capable of naming the un-nameable, thereby avoiding the 'bland polarity of "us-versus-them"'.<sup>65</sup> Important journal papers on the subject of the post-9/11 novel include the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, whose two volume edition 'Migration and Terrorism'<sup>66</sup> sought to assess the cultural responses that have set themselves

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<sup>63</sup> Gray, p. 19.

<sup>64</sup> Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn, 'Representing 9/11: Literature and Resistance', *Literature after 9/11* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> Kristiaan Versluys, *Out of the Blue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 15-17.

<sup>66</sup> 'Migration and Terrorism – special issue guest edited by Stephen Morton' and 'Literary Responses to the War on Terror – special issue guest edited by Robert

in opposition to the responses of the mainstream media and also to the notion of fundamentalism itself. The tenth anniversary edition of the *Journal of American Studies* has proved useful, in particular in its analysis of the domestic and the domesticating<sup>67</sup> raised by Rowan Williams in his own response to 9/11, as well as the interplay between the spatial and temporal. Marc Redfield's *The Rhetoric of Terror*<sup>68</sup> has been valuable in its analysis of the exhausted metaphor of 'the movie' in relation to 9/11, its engagement with issues of numerological fetishism and its examination of the 'sovereign and the terrorist'. (Others have written too about the 'like a movie' default: Susan Sontag's definition was that 'a catastrophe that is experienced will often seem eerily like its representation.'<sup>69</sup>) Analyses of the journalistic response that have provided assistance include *Journalism After September 11*, edited by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan<sup>70</sup> and *No Questions Asked: News Coverage Since 9/11* by Lisa Finnegan<sup>71</sup>. I have of course consulted Jean Baudrillard's *The Spirit of Terrorism*<sup>72</sup> as well as David Simpson's *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*<sup>73</sup> which added insights to my assessment of Maya Lin's work in Chapter 5.

I have consulted widely; however, my response has been at the level of the *praxis* of the individual writer. Indeed I have gone to novelists themselves to seek their explanations as to why they have found it so challenging to render 9/11 in fictional form and what literary approaches they have been able to devise to overcome their artistic anxieties. It is an approach that seems to me to be important in the context of the history of the novel as cultural discourse, and

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Spencer and Anastasia Valassopoulos', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 46, issue 3-4 (2010).

<sup>67</sup> Richard Crownshaw, 'Deterritorializing the 'Homeland' in American Studies and American Fiction after 9/11', *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 45, issue 4 (November 2011), pp. 757-776.

<sup>68</sup> Marc Redfield, *The Rhetoric of Terror: Reflections on 9/11 and the War on Terror* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).

<sup>69</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 19.

<sup>70</sup> *Journalism After September 11*, ed. by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>71</sup> Lisa Finnegan, *No Questions Asked: News Coverage since 9/11* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007).

<sup>72</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Requiem for the Twin Towers* (2002; London: Verso, 2012).

<sup>73</sup> David Simpson, *9/11, The Culture of Commemoration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

one that relies on close readings to extract a sense of what is at stake in individual texts. I believe that by taking this approach I have been able to add to the sum of knowledge about the repercussions for fiction of a traumatic event that Rowan Williams argues has been ‘In our lifetimes [...] one of the major imaginative disruptions’. The material I have garnered is both new and, I hope, illuminating. Rather than pursue the tradition – present in western thought since Kant - that philosophy is somehow adequate to the sublime object of catastrophe, I wanted to make the novel itself, the object of inquiry.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> This philosophical tradition is analyzed by Hans Blumenberg in *Shipwreck With Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997); arguably it is alive still in the work of Badiou and others.

## CHAPTER 1: RICHARD FORD'S TRANSACTOR

### Introduction

America always is slightly fictional

Jonathan Raban<sup>1</sup>

Frank Bascombe has had an unexpectedly long life. Richard Ford appeared to believe that his creation would not evolve beyond his first incarnation in *The Sportswriter*, published in 1986. 'I wrote one book', admitted the author, 'that was a kind of ambition I had; I would write a book, and then that book would be over and that would have exhausted all of my ammunition ...'<sup>2</sup> Yet Frank's nudging insistence on coming back to life not once but twice, against the expectations of his creator, makes his fictional evolution a rare, percipient and above all un-choreographed chronicle of American life over three decades. Each novel was published in the middle of the decade with which it concerned itself, each roughly ten years apart, making it a three-book cycle that is perhaps uniquely placed to reflect America's experience in the closing years of the twentieth century and the opening years of the twenty-first. Having embarked on his unplanned trilogy, Ford found that his ammunition was plentiful and his targets manifold.

The expectation may have been that Ford, leading literary transactor of America's pre- and post-millennial crises, would write a novel in which he

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Raban, 'In the Culture of Deceit', lecture at the Rothermere American Institute, Oxford, 10 November 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Ford interviewed by Ramona Koval, Sydney Writers' Festival: 4 June 2007. <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/bookshow/stories/2007/1941373.htm>> [accessed 4 May 2008].

attempted to decipher or at least express the neuroses provoked by the 9/11 attacks. He had, after all, written non-fiction about 9/11 with little apparent difficulty and yet appeared to have evaded engaging with it fictionally. It is important to note that Ford admits to loving journalism only because 'it's so easy and swift'<sup>3</sup>, perhaps an explanation as to why he felt able to contribute to newspapers on the subject but apparently not to his own fictional canon; 'so easy and swift' is hardly an endorsement by Ford of his non-fiction's gravitas, power or longevity. However, using an extended interview I conducted with the author, I will demonstrate that far from avoiding writing fictionally about 9/11, he did write a novel about it, albeit one that his readers failed to recognize. In the interview he also conceded that he plans to write about Frank Bascombe again. 'There's lots and lots of Frank left'<sup>4</sup>, he revealed; indeed two days prior to our interview, he said he had written an episode in which Frank faces the death of his dog.

In this chapter I demonstrate that Ford's 9/11 novel is *The Lay of the Land*, a work in which he also engages with the environmental trauma of Hurricane Katrina. Using an earlier draft of Ford's text written before Hurricane Katrina struck, I establish that in the published novel environmental assaults and fears of terrorist attacks are newly interwoven in his text. Just as importantly, there is clear evidence that he has borrowed imagery from both 9/11 and from Hurricane Katrina and adapted those images in order to explore his political thesis. In both cases, the repercussions of Hurricane Katrina and the assaults of 9/11 are attributed in the main to the inadequacies of President George W. Bush.

*The Sportswriter* trilogy is the fugal counterpoint to America's millennial crises; it is redolent with gathering gloom, encroaching natural as well as man-made disaster, increasing violence and the threat of death, laced together with ever more complex and compressed prose. In fictional form Ford is more acerbic, acute and critical than he has tended to be in his journalism. To underline the political nature of his fiction and the close links he perceives between his portrayal of Frank and his own responses to contemporary events, he told me

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Ford interviewed by Charlie Lee-Potter, 27 November 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

that in order to bring Frank back to life for a fourth time, he would need to be provoked by some form of political crisis. When that provocation occurs, as I will explain, he has plans to reinvigorate Frank in the most startling and unexpected way.

Journalism's diminishing capacity to adequately reflect the dystopian new millennium is an issue I will explore in relation to realist fiction like Ford's, arguing that the essential 'weakness'<sup>5</sup> of the realist text with its 'simulated reality,'<sup>6</sup> defined by Catherine Belsey, has been altered by time and by circumstance. It is no longer a 'weakness' but a potential strength, one that Ford uses to his advantage. Belsey's argument was that 'fiction does not normally deal with "politics" directly, except in the form of history or satire, that it is ostensibly innocent and therefore ideologically effective. But in its evasion of the real also lies its weakness as "realism".'<sup>7</sup> However, we are arguably more familiar now with the notion that facts themselves can have a 'simulated reality' and can specifically attempt to bring about an 'evasion of the real'; indeed these are words strikingly similar to those used by an aide to President George W Bush, who talked of the Administration being able to create 'our own reality', when it was expedient to do so. I will discuss his words in detail later in the chapter; in essence my contention is that as a result of the incremental downgrading of the 'real' text, the real text in this case being non-fiction of various kinds, the *realist* text of the novel can acquire a new potency, a new set of meanings, a new truth. This is an era in which the credentials of the primary witness have been degraded, possibly accentuated by the boasts of the subject of the witness's attention, the State, that invention is to be applauded. The old assumption that fiction was weakened by its 'evasion of the real' no longer seems apposite. My contention is that the events of 11 September 2001 have adjusted the parameters. The perceived threat of international terrorism, our sense of latent crisis, the compulsion to anticipate risk, combined with the critical erosion of trust in the veracity of factual reporting, have created a new space in which realist fiction can both evolve and resonate.

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<sup>5</sup> Catherine Belsey *Critical Practice* (1980; London: Routledge, 2002), p. 107.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

## Part One: Ford's 9/11 novel

It takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature<sup>8</sup>

Henry James

Given that Ford maintained he would write one book about Frank and yet went on to write two more, it is possible to argue that he had a covert epic ambition for Frank all along. Yet it does not matter; it is the fact that Frank has evolved as circumstances have evolved that makes his transactional role so important. Unlike other trilogical characters, Frank and Ford have advanced together, hand in hand, each unprepared for the lives and savage circumstances they would inherit, making Frank's trajectory very different to the pre-planned paths of other twentieth-century protagonists. Jean Paul Sartre plotted his document of French political life in the trilogy of novels *The Roads to Freedom*, knowing what the *dénouement* would be. Paul Scott did not publish the first of the novels that make up the *Raj Quartet* until 1966, long after the political era with which he dealt had ended. In Ford's three book series, the world changes at the same pace as the characters.

When Ford began writing *The Sportswriter*, the prevailing political wind was blowing briskly from the right. As noted by Howard Zinn<sup>9</sup> and others, Kevin Phillips, Republican political analyst and author, defined Ronald Reagan's 1980s as 'the triumph of upper America - an ostentatious celebration of wealth, the political ascendancy of the richest third of the population and a glorification of capitalism, free markets and finance.'<sup>10</sup> These years of 'triumph' were the

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<sup>8</sup> Henry James, *Hawthorne* (1879; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-present, Third Edition* (1980; Harlow: Pearson Education, 2003), p. 580.

<sup>10</sup> Kevin Phillips *The Politics of Rich and Poor: Wealth and the American Electorate in the Reagan Aftermath* (New York: Random House, 1990), p. xvii.

years when Ford was shaping Frank's life in *The Sportswriter*. By comparison with the political landscape that Frank would find himself inhabiting as the second and third novels in his cycle evolved, *The Sportswriter* years were relatively benign and prosperous. Frank could indulge in his voyeuristic passion for mail order catalogues, seeking out the 'abundance of the purely ordinary'. He could inhabit the 'irresistible' lives of the smiling people pictured in the catalogues, with a flick of his Magic Marker and a credit card transaction, secure in his redemptive and conserving suburb. But as Ford told me, the suburbs do not remain redemptive forever:

They finally prove to be unrealistic. They become less redemptive as the novels progress. I grew up in the suburbs and I kind of liked it there. And over the course of time, around 1990, I sort of thought, Christ, where's the fun here? My feelings changed. But I wanted Frank to be the kind of realist I like him to be, which is to say here it is, you made it, live with it, try to find something in it that you like. Try to articulate what it is that led you to make them.<sup>11</sup>

Ford's insistence on changing the nature of Frank's surroundings is an important aspect of his fictional response. As real-life political events evolved, so too did Frank's own backdrop, but even more crucially so too did Frank himself. Indeed, Frank does not so much evolve as metamorphose altogether. The publication of *The Sportswriter* coincided with the revelation that President Reagan and Vice President George H. W. Bush had sanctioned the secret selling of arms to Iran in an attempt to force the release of seven American hostages being held by pro-Iranian groups in Lebanon. In addition, money from the arms sales was being used to secretly fund the Contra rebels in Nicaragua. As well as violating America's weapons embargo against Iran, the news exploded the much-repeated myth that Reagan would never negotiate with terrorists. As Zinn pointed out, the Iran-Contra scandal 'became a perfect example of the double line of defense of the American Establishment. The first defense is to deny the truth. If exposed, the second defense is to investigate, but not too much; the press will publicize, but they will not get to the heart of the

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<sup>11</sup> RF interviewed by CLP, 27 November 2012.



matter.’<sup>12</sup> (Zinn’s analysis could just as easily be used to define the lack of curiosity that some journalists displayed when George W. Bush won the 2000 presidential election with fewer popular votes than his rival, an outcome that Ford admits provoked him into setting *The Lay of the Land* at that time.) The revelations about the Iran-Contra affair, unknown to Ford when he was writing *The Sportswriter*, cast a shadow over *Independence Day* and *The Lay of the Land*. Both later books are heavy with the threat of violence and terrorism and in both novels the character of Frank is adjusted to take account of the new world in which he found himself.

Frank’s transfer from a seller of stories to a seller of realty coincides with his growing power as a commercial man. He trades in property, occasionally buys houses back, even moves them brick by brick from one place to another, acquires houses for the rental market, buys a hot-dog business and forms his own property company, which he calls Realty-Wise. He doesn’t create things any longer; he simply moves things and people around. Frank is a man who makes transactions; this is where his true value lies. Interviewed in 2006, Richard Ford described his desire to make Frank a ‘transactive’ character, a kind of universal currency-converter. ‘I was determined not to write a book about a writer. But yes, I needed something to make him persuasive as the sort of transactive character I wanted him to be. With Frank’s speaking voice – the intelligence that that voice implies – he is able to transact the culture for the reader.’<sup>13</sup>

Frank’s ‘transactive’ role means that he is a different man in each of the three books, because the world in which he finds himself, the environment he is ‘transacting’ keeps changing. This is not simply character development or evolution, but character reinvention; Frank is an alternative character each time, an unconventional aspect of his role that Ford himself celebrates. Speaking about the creation of the character that, to use numerical rubric, we might call

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<sup>12</sup> Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States*, p. 586.

<sup>13</sup> RF interviewed by Phil Hogan, ‘To be Frank’, *Observer*, 24 September 2006, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/sep/24/fiction.features>> [accessed 25 March 2013].

Frank No. 3, Ford described him as a new individual altogether, an invented fictional model of Frank No 1 and Frank No 2:

When I was writing the book and really aging Frank ... what I came to believe was that that notion of development and even indeed the whole conception of character is something fictitious that we invent to make our lives as they go along begin to seem continuous and more plausible and to make sense to ourselves. Because what I was doing was I was just making another guy up in the third book. I gave him the same name as the guy in the other two books and I gave him some of the same attributes but I was inventing him wholly newly...<sup>14</sup>

Ford asserts, too, that there is no reason why he should not be able to change characters' eye colours if he chooses, or even their opinions. And yet, in his interview with me, I would argue that he went even further, asserting that if he writes a fourth novel about Frank, it is not simply the colour of his eyes that will change:

What I really wanted to do when I wrote *The Lay of the Land*, I wanted to make Frank an African American. But I didn't have the nerve. I thought that people might not tolerate it. I thought that people might say 'oh, come on. Don't be an idiot.' [...] You come to the end of each book in which you encounter him and when I pick him up again at the beginning of another book and I don't want to look back at the other books and have to make him up again anew, with maybe relying on certain things that I remember, but there are some things I don't remember. The fact that he's Frank Bascombe in all three books is beside the point. It doesn't matter if he's blonde in one book and has black hair in the next. Or if he's African American.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> RF interviewed by Ramona Koval, *The Book Show*, Radio National, 4 June 2007  
<<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bookshow/richard-fords-the-lay-of-the-land/3242570#transcript>>

[accessed 25 March, 2013].

<sup>15</sup> RF interviewed by CLP.

Questioned more closely about whether he would really dare, in a subsequent novel, reinvent Frank as an African American, Ford went further:

Make Frank be black? Of *course* I would dare. If I could write something good, making it be that way, I would dare. Yeah, I would. It would be a nice tip of my hat to the Obama administration. I wouldn't mind the fight. But I wouldn't want to fail at it. I wouldn't want it to be terrible. I wouldn't want the idea to be the only thing I had to draw on. Anybody can dream up an idea. [...] I like to write about race. I like to get into people's face about race.<sup>16</sup>

Again, to underline the political nature of Ford's fiction, a political sensibility that seems lacking from his more anodyne journalism, he expanded on his desire to 'tip his hat' to the Obama administration:

Obama's presidency has been the most important historical event of my adult life. That and the civil rights act of 1965. So I don't see how that could elude me. [...] This is the kind of thing that would get into Frank's head. [...] I voted for Obama, I wanted him to be president. The fact that he is president and voted in twice is the most important thing in my life. But I don't know the guy and probably wouldn't even like him. He's pious. He's pious. And Bill [Clinton] is pious too but in his own folksy, don't leave me alone in a room with your wife kind of way – that takes a little of that piety away... [If Romney had won] it would have been a calamity. [...] politics to me in those books, it's finger pointing towards politics and allusions to politics. But I sort of subscribed to the notion of George Eliot in *Felix Holt* that all private lives are prefigured by public lives. And I don't know if I think it's exactly prefigured, but it's worth saying that they're related. Connected. A connection *can* be made, even if it's not made. It's implicit rather than explicit. I'm saying this is going on here, that's going on there – do you see anything?<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> RF interviewed by CLP.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Ford's decision to set his latest novel in Canada was, in part, a reaction to his dismay that Americans did not appear to 'see anything'. To that extent it is a continuation of his 9/11 novel, *The Lay of the Land*:

Canadians ... think they need to understand things. Americans think they don't. No, they really don't. Americans just have to *do* stuff. Do this and think about it later. Romney is a good example. If anybody had actually stopped and thought about what was going to happen nobody would have cared about him. But they didn't give a shit. They just didn't want this black guy. Yes, it is depressing – very depressing. The most depressing thing. There was a poll before the elections. Americans said that they understood that in their hearts there were certain racist feelings. 51% of them agreed to that. 51% of those polled admitted to having racist views, holding racist views. And they reckoned there was about another 7 or 8% who implicitly held racist views but did not say so. I found that to be one of the most dispiriting things I ever heard.<sup>18</sup>

As if to underline the more politically aware climate that he found in Canada, on returning home from his publicity tour he had to be stopped from getting into a bar fight over politics. Fighting, he told me, is one of his great loves, a love that he drew on when describing Frank's fist fight in *The Lay of the Land*:

I like friction and I like conflict... I'm getting old for it but I *really* liked it when I was young. Fights. Verbal. Physical. I liked it. Because when I was young I got kind of rendered slightly cowardly in a fight and I realized that it was so much worse to be rendered cowardly than it was to just take a licking. And I just thought to myself, God, administering a licking – it's great, compared to feeling ashamed of yourself. I put my nose right into the middle of everything. Frank's fight was one of my fights. You bet. I had lots of those. No matter how fights start, they always seem to start quickly. They're not for everybody. When I came back from Canada last month, I came into a little town called Turner, Montana, which is about as big as this room. But it had a bar. And my

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

friend and I, my hunting partner, we went into the bar to make a phone call. And I had an Obama button on my hunting jacket and this guy he came up to me and he said 'what the fuck do you mean wearing an Obama button into a bar like this?' And I said 'I'm sorry. I think he's the president of the United States'. He said 'he's a nigger. He's a fucking nigger. He's going to ruin this country'. And I just went right at the guy and my friend grabbed me. I was going to punch the guy and I thought to myself – you're going to get killed here. These were all big old sock buster guys in cowboy boots. They would have stomped me. And it was one of the few times in my life when I thought to myself 'God, I'm so glad nothing bad happened.' So I said to him 'you're a silly motherfucker, aren't you?' And he said an amazing thing. He said 'I *am* a silly motherfucker.' It was kind of slightly deflating. It took me aback a little bit. That's not the *code*. You're supposed to say, 'who the fuck do you think you are' and then off things go.<sup>19</sup>

That encounter in a Montana bar is in microcosm what Ford would focus on if he writes his fourth Frank Bascombe novel. This is the evolving climate that has driven Ford to change Frank and to change him to such an extent that Ford considers redrawing Frank as an African American:

when I walked into that bar and heard this guy saying 'nigger this' and 'nigger that', I just wanted to jump out of the window. I felt that if Romney was elected that Kristina and I would probably have to, as an act of protest, leave America and go live somewhere else and I don't feel any less that way now. I don't know if I would have the nerve to go now because it would require such a dismantling of a life and I like where I live. But I feel such a sense of dishearten about America, even with Obama as president. I was really afraid the liberals were gonna abandon him after the first debate in which he 'disappointed' them. Their boy, their boy - they felt so proud of themselves for voting for a black man. And then he gets up on that stage and doesn't act like they want him to act. But he just had a bad day. But you can't have a bad day if you're 'our

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<sup>19</sup> RF interviewed by CLP.

boy'. [...] But my dismay, my dismay alone is probably not for me provocation enough to write something. But if you can feel that maybe that dismay had in itself the seeds of something that might allay the dismay, that you might feel a kind of 'commotion' about it – Seamus [Heaney] was talking about this in his Nobel speech – some possibility that you can't quite see and feel, then I might do it.<sup>20</sup>

The key influences that have made the fictional Frank change his nature are the facts: the real-life world of America. As the three novels unravel, the world in which Frank lives becomes progressively more violent, more threatening, less forgiving and potentially fatal. *The Lay of the Land*, written, as Ford says, 'entirely' after 9/11 carries within it the shadow of forthcoming real life events, as well as bearing the imprint of terrorist attacks such as the 1995 Oklahoma bombing, which was, until 9/11, the worst peacetime attack upon the United States in the country's history. Timothy McVeigh, the 33 year-old Gulf War veteran responsible for the murder of 168 people, was executed three months before the 9/11 onslaughts. Not surprisingly, the implicit threat of terrorism becomes a great deal more explicit and direct in *The Lay of the Land*. So too does the impact of natural disaster, Nature's very own terrorist force.

Frank's awareness of terrorism is vague to the point of non-existent in *The Sportswriter*. Before the attacks of 11 September 2001, America's recent experience of domestic terrorism had been limited to the Oklahoma bombing and the campaign of the Unabomber. Domestic attack was not a threat that Americans gave much thought to. In *The Sportswriter*, Selma, Frank's lover during his disastrous term teaching at Berkshire College, admits to him that she has had a 'profound' involvement with terrorists, 'in which she'd hinted she'd killed people...'<sup>21</sup> There is a vainglorious boastfulness about her claim, but by the time that Frank emerges as a new character in *The Lay of the Land* he is briefly suspected of involvement in the terrorist attack on Haddam Hospital. This attack is not a boast but a genuine explosion that kills one of Frank's acquaintances. As the novel closes we hear that the man responsible is 'A man

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<sup>20</sup> RF interviewed by CLP.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter* (1986; London: Collins Harvill, 2006), p. 222. All subsequent references are to this edition.

of the Muslim faith'<sup>22</sup> who wanted to send a message to a fellow-Muslim whom he believed had been corrupted by American values.

Earlier in the novel we learn that Sally, Frank's second wife, has religious fundamentalist children from whom she is estranged. Frank returns home and picks up a newspaper in his office and reads about a 'CIA warning about a planned attack on our shores by Iran.'<sup>23</sup> In a paragraph distilled until it is no more than a concentrated jus of American millennial angst, Frank watches a threatening gang of youths standing beneath the crawling neon of a quasi-Times Square electronic billboard. In an asyndetically neurotic construct, he reads:

*Quarterly*down 29.3 ... *ATT*down62% ... *Dow*close10.462 ...  
*HappyThanksgiving2000* ...  
*LLBeanChinamadeslippersrecalledduetodrawstringdefectabletochoketod*  
*dlersusers* ... *PierreSalingertestifiesreLockerbiecrashsez "Iknowwhodidit"*  
*... Airlineblanketsandheadrestssaidnotsantitized* ...  
*Buffalostymiedunder15 "lakeeffectsnow ... HorrorstorieswithFlaballots:*  
*"WhatinthennameofGodisgoingonhere?"workersez* ...  
*NJenclavesuffersmysteriousbombdetolinktoelectionsuspec'd* ...  
*TropicaldepresWaynenotlikelytomakeland ... BigpileupontheGardenState*  
*... Happy Thanksgiving ...*<sup>24</sup>

Ford blends financial ruination, litigiousness, blame, threat, trash-culture, terrorism, and that monument to the all-American ideal – Thanksgiving Day - into one gigantic, choking, indigestible Declaration of *Dependence*: dependence upon consumer products and the financial markets. Independence Day is the essence of American-ness, the only national holiday to celebrate the existence of the nation itself. It proves hard for Frank to give thanks; the Thanksgiving Day of *The Lay of the Land* is celebrated with his attempted murder.

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<sup>22</sup> Richard Ford, *The Lay of the Land* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 478. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>23</sup> Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, p. 228.

<sup>24</sup> Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, pp. 163-164.

Violence is easier for Frank to understand than terrorism, but his early experience of it is limited to being punched comically in the face by his girlfriend Vicki in *The Sportswriter*, her 'fists balled like little grapeshoots.'<sup>25</sup> And yet, by *Independence Day* the violent stakes have been upped and we learn that Frank has been mugged and a former lover Clair Devane has been raped and murdered. Frank also remembers a time in New York when he and his first wife Ann were threatened by a gunman. His recollection had been that in a piece of perfectly executed gallantry, he neatly saved Ann from harm. But in *Independence Day* we discover that the life-saving rescue, for which he had congratulated himself for so long, was nothing of the kind. We hear from Ann that what he had actually done was to jump behind her to protect himself. By the end of *The Lay of the Land* gunmen appear once again. This time, Frank does not step aside, but in a *dénouement* that runs counter to any idea of heroic justice, he is shot and comes close to death.

The inexorable drive towards violence, threat and terror is marked quite clearly in the development of the character of Paul, Frank's son. In *The Sportswriter* Paul is an eccentric joke-teller with an interest in birds. By *Independence Day* Paul has progressed to being a maladjusted and sinister teenager who kills birds, goes shoplifting and has been arrested for attacking the female security guard deployed to arrest him. By *The Lay of the Land*, we learn that Paul aged seventeen had attempted the taboo act of sex with his fifteen year old sister. By now he is a writer for the greetings card producer Hallmark Cards, the real-life company that describes itself as a producer of 'personal expression products.'<sup>26</sup> Paul embodies the cheap end of American openness and conviviality – insincerity. He emotes lavishly to entice potential customers but is incapable of feeling the sentiments he makes a living from.

Frank's acquaintance Wally, whom he meets at the Divorced Men's Club, commits suicide in *The Sportswriter*. Frank is more puzzled than distressed and wonders why Wally could not find a reason to keep going, since 'what else is the ordinary world good for except to supply reasons not to check out early?'<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ford, *The Sportswriter*, p. 290.

<sup>26</sup> Hallmark, <[www.hallmark.com](http://www.hallmark.com)> [accessed 4 May 2008].

<sup>27</sup> Ford, *The Sportswriter*, p. 343.



In a neat piece of synchronicity, Frank has a more important and devastating encounter with a suicidal man, also called Wally, in *The Lay of the Land*. This Wally is the first husband of Frank's second wife Sally. And to reinforce the idea of growing disharmony and discord in *The Lay of the Land*, Wally doesn't commit suicide once, as his alter ego does in *The Sportswriter*, he performs the seemingly impossible and does it twice. Wally Mark 2 is the man who outdoes the spirit of American excess and dies twice. There is a sense of diminishing values as the three books progress and it seems somehow incumbent on Wally 2 to go for the double in order for his statement about life to have any meaning at all.

*The Lay of the Land* is more preoccupied with death than its forebears. The novel does, after all, start and end with the account of a teacher murdered by one of her pupils. Twenty pages into the novel Richard Ford casts in a reference to the Columbine High School massacre of 1999. Even the therapy which Frank receives, apparently successfully, for his prostate cancer carries with it a deathly, explosive intent; 'sixty radioactive iodine seeds encased in titanium BBs and smart-bombed into my prostate at the Mayo Clinic...' <sup>28</sup> Frank is not just carrying around with him the thought of death, but the incendiary instruments of death too, buried inside his prostate.

The attempted, and almost successful, murder of Frank is the shocking finale to the three novel series. Threatened as he has been by cancer, he did not expect death to confront him from another sightline. Richard Ford suggests, not entirely convincingly, that by the time of the attempted killing, Frank is becoming a 'kind of zen-like character.' <sup>29</sup> His 'Permanent Period', as he calls it, has become indistinguishable from his Tibetan Buddhist business partner Mike's understanding of the 'next level'. The Dalai Lama's *The Road to the Open Heart* takes on a new resonance for him. No longer is it the just-to-be-mocked reading material given to him by Mike, but an actual description of the dance that life has taken him via ever more dangerous, narrow and dark arterial roads to his

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<sup>28</sup> Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> RF interviewed by Chas Bowie, *Portland Mercury*, 19 October 2006, <<http://www.portlandmercury.com/portland/richard-ford-interview/Content?oid=73912>> [accessed 25 March 2013].

pierced chest and open heart surgery. Making meaning out of death is something that preoccupies Ford; as I hope to demonstrate later in this chapter, it is a conundrum to which he finally secures an answer.

*Independence Day* was written during the early 1990s, when domestically, the pivotal event was the 26 February 1993 bombing of The World Trade Center in New York that killed six people and injured more than 1,000. The van, packed with 1,500 pounds of explosives and driven to the door, brought with it a new awareness for Americans of the threat of international terrorism. New York's State Governor Mario Cuomo assessed the lack of awareness hitherto: 'We all have that feeling of being violated. No foreign people or force has ever done this to us. Until now we were invulnerable.'<sup>30</sup> An eyewitness quoted by the BBC at the time spoke with prescient insight. 'It felt like an airplane hit the building.'<sup>31</sup>

In October 1995, as *Independence Day* was being published, Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, a blind cleric, was given a life sentence for orchestrating the bombing. Internationally, the news for Americans was dominated by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and the United States' retaliation. Coverage of the relentlessly televised war of Desert Storm with its smart bombs, smart studio sets and smart reporters was hard to avoid. But who would have imagined, Richard Ford or anyone, that by the time he would be writing the third unplanned novel in his trio of books that the 1993 bombing of the Twin Towers would be eclipsed by the subsequent assault upon them?

By the time of *The Lay of the Land* Frank has reached the age of 55, the year is 2000 and the American election is in the process of being 'stolen'<sup>32</sup> by George W. Bush with the complicity of the American media and public. It is hard, therefore, to accept without question that *The Lay of the Land* is 'my 9/11 novel'. The action of this third novel takes place the year before the terrorist

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<sup>30</sup> Mario Cuomo, New York State Governor, quoted by the BBC 26 Feb 1993. <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/26/newsid\\_2516000/2516469.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/26/newsid_2516000/2516469.stm)> [accessed 4 May 2008].

<sup>31</sup> Bruce Pomper, 34-year-old broker, quoted by the BBC 26 Feb 1993. <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/26/newsid\\_2516000/2516469.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/26/newsid_2516000/2516469.stm)> [accessed 4 May 2008].

<sup>32</sup> RF interviewed by Chas Bowie, *Portland Mercury*, 19 October 2006.

attacks of 11 September 2001, but Ford has confirmed that *The Lay of the Land* was written 'entirely' after 2001<sup>33</sup> and, crucially, with those attacks in mind. Even though he chose deliberately to write about times *before* the 9/11 assaults took place, he did so because these were the 'twilight years of perceived normalcy' when that terrible day 'is just around the corner'. This is where the novel's 'frictive power'<sup>34</sup> is generated:

When I started thinking about 9/11 and its immediate aftermath, it seems to me that all the things that we thought had changed our lives forever were really going on before that. And we, because of this fierce grasp upon normalcy, were not available to it. And one of the things that realistic fiction can do – and its moral address – is to say to the reader, 'Pay attention. Pay attention. Pay attention.'<sup>35</sup>

Richard Ford's repeated plea that we should 'pay attention' is redolent of Arthur Miller's distant call that 'attention must be paid'; indeed, comparisons have been drawn between Frank and Willie Loman as the quiet, insignificant but insistent voices of America's recent past.<sup>36</sup>

Questioned more closely about the implicit connections between 9/11 and *The Lay of the Land*, Richard Ford has, in the past, been clear. Asked about the timeline of *The Lay of the Land*, he stressed the political outcome that the brawl between Gore and Bush had produced: 'it was the moment the Republicans stole the government and the Supreme Court acted not like a Supreme Court but a Republican court, and the aftermath is the war in Iraq.'<sup>37</sup> In his interview with me, I would argue that Ford went further than he has done hitherto in clarifying his intentions in *The Lay of the Land*. He confirmed that it is his 9/11 novel and, asked if he found it disappointing that so few people seemed to see that context, he said that it did not surprise him. Not because of the obliqueness of his approach, but because of the inadequacies of his American audience in particular:

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<sup>33</sup> RF interviewed by Ramona Koval, 4 June 2007.

<sup>34</sup> RF interviewed by Phil Hogan, *The Observer*, 24 September 2006.

<sup>35</sup> RF interviewed by Chas Bowie, *Portland Mercury*, 19 October 2006.

<sup>36</sup> RF interviewed by Phil Hogan, *Observer*, 24 September 2006.

<sup>37</sup> RF interviewed by Chas Bowie, *Portland Mercury*, 19 October 2006.

*The Lay of The Land* is specifically a 9/11 novel, albeit from the temporal 'advantage' of thinking of America *before* the calamity. The fact that it's my 9/11 novel may not be apparent - it wasn't to many people - but that was my intent. It was a political novel so it doesn't surprise me that people didn't understand. Because Americans aren't interested in politics. They want only to have to pretend to be interested in it once every four years. The inter-relationships between what we should have known before 9/11 and how shocked we were when 9/11 happened – those kind of things are things that Americans simply do not want to think about at all because it implicates us in our own fates. So no, I was *sorry* but I wasn't surprised. Also, I kind of wonder if I wasn't a little post facto in that way of thinking about the book. Maybe I didn't get completely articulate about it until after the book was finished. When I started to write the book I realized that I couldn't write about the specifics of 9/11 because it was too soon, it was still in the provenance of journalists I thought, and for me, using my clumsy metaphor, events have to sink into the ground and percolate back up through the shoes of people like me. So I was always thinking that I will write about what happened before 9/11 because I can see almost everything that everybody thought and everything that happened in 9/11 presaged in what happened before. Intellectually and even aesthetically that's a hard ticket for people to punch.<sup>38</sup>

For Americans reading *The Lay of the Land*, the re-examination of that phase in their national history is potentially a resonant and painful one. The hagiography of President George W. Bush in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks becomes highly questionable once memories are summoned of that earlier political phase in 2000, when Bush retained the presidency with fewer votes than his political opponent. In 2001 America crowned Bush as their charismatic saviour, even though his legitimacy was arguably seized rather than earned. The inadequacy of the American media in exposing the tenuousness of George W. Bush's mandate served only to underline the flaws inherent in the reporting of the so-

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<sup>38</sup> RF interviewed by CLP.

called facts. The facts did not fit, so the American media invented a new set of them that would. No one seemed willing to 'pay attention', so the view was taken that the facts did not matter. This was how Robert W. McChesney, Professor of Communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, put it:

When the recount report indicating that Gore won Florida was released two months after September 11, what was striking was how almost all of the press reported that the results were mixed or that Bush had won. The reason for the press making this judgement was it only looked at the recount in the few counties where Al Gore had requested it; who actually won the actual election in Florida seemed not to interest the press one whit. In a manner of thinking, the press had no choice but to provide this interpretation. If the media conceded that Gore, in fact, had won the race in Florida, it would have made people logically ask, 'why didn't the media determine this when it mattered?' ... As soon as the leaders are not the product of free and fair elections, the professional reliance on official sources - which is wobbly by democratic standards to begin with - collapses.<sup>39</sup>

In October 2001 The American Press Institute produced a handbook designed to give guidance to journalists reporting at times of national crisis. The intention of this respected guide was to offer a blueprint for crisis reporting and its authors asked that 'you put it on your shelf with other journalism guides and texts. Use it when the next crisis story erupts in your community or region.' And yet, even this sober, restrained book advocated a form of in-built censorship and a version of journalistic bias to ensure not that the truth was reported but that national strength was reinforced. The American media had skated chaotically over the facts at the time of the Presidential election in order, as Robert W. McChesney claimed, to retrospectively protect the status of the most powerful office in the world. In the aftermath of 9/11 the instructions to skirt round the the truth became an official *modus operandi*. Ken Paulson, senior

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<sup>39</sup> Robert W. McChesney, 'September 11 and the Structural Limitations of US Journalism', *Journalism After September 11*, ed. by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 91-100, p. 97.

vice president of The Freedom Forum (a foundation dedicated to free speech) and an adjunct professor of law at Vanderbilt University in Nashville explicitly *demand*ed partisan reporting. 'It was one thing for the press to challenge an unpopular war like Vietnam. It's quite another to question governmental decisions when the enemy is in our midst and our citizens are casualties.' And he went on to say:

There's already been a backlash against some reporters. As columnist Mary McGrory reported, 'Ask any journalist who raised questions about [the president's] early handling of the crisis. They have been inundated with furious calls calling them a disgrace to their profession and even traitors.' ... A free press can serve as an invaluable watchdog on government actions, without undercutting our national interests. Individual reporters can ask tough questions while wearing flag lapel pins. Professionalism and patriotism can – and must – coexist. The American people are counting on it.<sup>40</sup>

When even a national journalism guidebook recommends that the government's decisions should not be challenged at times of crisis, it raises questions about how much credibility should be given the so-called 'truth.' An international poll conducted at the end of 2007 for the BBC World Service bears out Paulson's view, with 40% of respondents agreeing that it was more important to maintain social harmony, 'even if it meant curbing the press's freedom to report news truthfully.' Pollsters interviewed 11,344 people in 14 countries and found that in 'the United States, Britain and Germany, only around 29% of those interviewed thought their media did a good job in reporting news accurately.'<sup>41</sup>

To 'pay attention' to Richard Ford's sequence of realist fiction is to glean more than we might from factual reports of the years that fictional Frank and his real-life contemporaries lived through. Changes in the language, tone, style and even in the character of Frank himself tell their own story. The narrative sway of

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<sup>40</sup> Ken Paulson, 'A patriotic press is a vigilant one', in *Crisis Journalism, A Handbook for Media Response* (American Press Institute October 2001), pp. 46-47, p.47.

<sup>41</sup> BBC World Service Poll carried out in October 2007.  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7134918.stm>.>  
 [accessed 25 March 2013].

Richard Ford's trilogy takes us from the 'normal applauseless life of us all'<sup>42</sup> to a world threatened by terrorism, corruption and natural disaster. But it is in that narrative, in fiction and in story-telling that we seek the truth that the so-called facts can never fully establish. Even America's most revered television news presenters who codify, organize and disseminate the apparent facts, could only make sense of the events of 11 September 2001 in fictional terms. 'It looks like a movie'<sup>43</sup> was the best description that one of the USA's most familiar news anchors could summon to her aid on the day that the aircraft hit, a more prosaic way of expressing what Susan Sontag meant when she wrote that 'a catastrophe that is experienced will often seem eerily like its representation'<sup>44</sup> There is, however, a fundamental flaw here. Ford attempted to represent the catastrophe of 9/11 in fiction because he felt he could say so much more. Yet, if his American audience failed to see that he had written a 9/11 novel, how then could fiction be so much more resonant than journalism? Here again is Ford's assertion that journalism is somehow 'quick and easy', but overlaid with the more important point that journalism does not require deep knowledge:

Journalism's role is to provide a view of the world upon which people can act. And for me, I'm more interested in providing a view of the world which shows you what *happens* when you act. And that's necessarily speculative. I love journalism. Because it's so easy and it's swift and it's probably not very good and I can pretend that it is. And write it and go about my business. With journalism you can get away with so little. I was talking to Tom Stoppard last night and he said, talking about journalism, that 'I used to think that if I've got to write about something, I've got to know a lot about it. But', he said, 'that's rubbish, rubbish'. You have a lot of rope to hang yourself with a novel.<sup>45</sup>

It is at least a partial defence of fiction over fact, or at least of fiction blending with fact. Frank Bascombe, with his sometimes limited grasp on reality, is of course emblematic of the way in which fiction and facts can elide; so too are the

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<sup>42</sup> Ford, *The Sportswriter*, p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> NBC's Katie Couric, quoted in *Journalism After Sept 11*, p. 4.

<sup>44</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 19.

<sup>45</sup> RF interviewed by CLP.

novels, blending as they do a fictional landscape on which twentieth- and twenty-first-century realities encroach. The elision of fact and fiction is demonstrably deliberate, but possibly inevitable too, given Ford's own inability to remember what is real and what is imagined. *The Lay of the Land* includes a reference to the Barnegat Bay Bridge road sign that trumpets it is 'New Jersey's Best Kept Secret'. Asked about the sign on a driving tour with a reporter from *The New York Times*, Ford attempted to find the sign, but then admitted, 'I can't remember whether I made that up or not.'<sup>46</sup> Indeed, in his interview with me, when asked why he had named two different characters Wally in Books 1 and 3 and why both those characters had killed themselves, he had to be reminded which characters they were and what purpose they served in the text. But more crucially, the fictional/factional transactions come from Frank himself. After all, he begins his fictional existence working as a novelist, a purveyor of storytelling. But he finds, not in the least to his regret, that after one glorious burst of sparks he has nothing more to say and turns himself into a sports journalist whose supposed job is to tell at least *a* truth, if not *the* truth. And yet he discovers that his subjects, athletes, do not have that fictional quality which would make them interesting: 'When you look very closely, the more everybody seems just alike – unsurprising and factual. And for that reason I sometimes tell less than I know, and for my money the boys in my racket make a mistake with in-depth interviews.'<sup>47</sup> Ford has touched upon an aspect of 'the real' that reinforces not its strengths, but its flaws. In fact, Catherine Belsey's definition of realist fiction as suffering from an 'evasion of the real' suddenly has some currency as a definition of the factual, in which writers may evade that which is 'unsurprising' by telling 'less than' they know.

The final stage in Frank's evolution from a peddler of the imagined to a salesman of the real is represented by his eventual choice of career. What could be more intensely, concentratedly, reductively real than the big brother of the adjective 'real' - the noun 'reality' - and reality's stake-holding, commercial cousin, 'realty'? In *Independence Day* Frank elects to become a conduit, a

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<sup>46</sup> Charles McGrath, 'A New Jersey State of Mind', *New York Times* 24 October 2006. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/25/books/25ford.html?fta=y>> [accessed 4 May 2008].

<sup>47</sup> Ford, *The Sportswriter*, p. 62.



transactor, for those who seek their own piece of American soil, a realtor for whom prices will always be 'an index to the national well-being.'<sup>48</sup> Frank's new job as a barometer of 'national well-being' with reality/realty for sale, allows him to spin dreams for putative customers like the Markhams from Vermont. They do not want the reality of realty, but they do want to be able to imagine it. Frank has finally walked inside one of his beloved home shopping catalogues. Smiling out of its pages, he can promise irresistible abundance for anyone who will transact with him. But in a piece of omniscient real-estate manoeuvring, he gets to seal his own violent fate by selling a house to the Feensters. The Feensters have entered into that double-edged trade-off. They have won a vast amount of money on the lottery, but have thereby lost the sense of having earned the house that they buy. Their criminal leanings will bring gunmen to Frank's door in retribution.

The restorative power of real estate evaporates as the three novels progress. In tandem with the increasing violence and the growing suspicion of incomers and immigrants, real estate starts to lose its 'redemptive theme in the civic drama ... And realty itself – stage manager to that drama – had stopped signalling our faith in the future, our determination not to give in to dread, our blitheness in the face of life's epochal slowdown.'<sup>49</sup> And worse, Haddam, the town where Frank bought his first family house, becomes the kind of place where 'someone might set a bomb off just to attract its attention.' It is Richard Ford's cry to 'pay attention' yet again, to ward off violent disaster, because the solid, reassuring bulk of small town America is being eroded.

Frank's large Tudor house in New Jersey, a description of which opens the first page of the first novel, is comfortably, suburbanly hefty. 19 Hoving Road, in the invented town of Haddam, (rich with Sadam echoism), is the house that Frank believed would 'set my wife and me and our three children [...] up for a good life'<sup>50</sup> There it sits, plumply, alongside the cemetery fence, guarding the ground where his son Ralph is buried, along with three signers of the Declaration of Independence. (Ford's own house in Princeton, owned previously by a realtor,

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<sup>48</sup> Richard Ford, *Independence Day* (1995; London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, p. 90.

<sup>50</sup> Ford, *The Sportswriter*, p.1.

sat in a similar position; alongside the cemetery fence that guarded the graves of two signers of the Declaration.) That same Declaration is the perfect essence of American-ness. But by the third novel we learn that Frank has sold the house to a theological organization that had 'transformed it into an ecumenical victims' rights center. (Land-mine victims, children-soldier victims, African-circumcision victims, families of strangled cheerleaders, all became regular sights on the sidewalkless street.)'<sup>51</sup>

The third and final stage in the house's devaluation from mock-Tudor empire to humiliated cloud of brick dust comes when a Republican horse-breeder buys it, demolishes it and replaces it with a homophonically absurd mansion called 'Not Furlong.'<sup>52</sup> Collapse is, after all, real estate's final appointment and one that Richard Ford returns to at the end of *The Lay of the Land*. The Queen Regent is an anthropomorphic, crenellated and canopied hotel, stoically facing the Atlantic. When it is demolished, it gets an audience of camera-wielding groupies and petty criminals to see it go. The description as it falls is redolent of the Twin Towers as they imploded. 'Her longitude lines, rows of square windows in previously perfect vertical alignment, all go wrinkled, as if the whole idea of the building had sustained, then sought to shrug off a profound insult, a killer wind off the ocean. And then rather simply, all the way down she comes, more like a brick curtain being lowered than like a proud old building being killed. Eighteen seconds is about it.'<sup>53</sup> The description of the Queen Regent's collapse is one that could easily have been included in a news report from New York on 11 September 2001. Indeed, it would have been more meaningful than the news-anchor's inadequate statement that 'It looks like a scene from a movie'.

Lest these assertions seem tendentious, I asked Ford if it was legitimate to suggest that his description of the Queen Regent's demise was, in fact, his way of describing the Twin Towers' demise too:

You're not imagining that. It's there. And I knew that when I was writing it. I was very much taken by all of the film footage that I had seen of the

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<sup>51</sup> Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, p. 48.

<sup>52</sup> Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, p. 48.

<sup>53</sup> Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, pp. 305-306.

way those implosions occur. Namely that you're watching this thing and then there are all these puffs of smoke from the bottom. They sink from the bottom down. They don't blow them up from the top down, they sink them from the bottom and the destructive element goes from the bottom up. That was the hotel I grew up in, in Little Rock. [...] But the fact that it was reminiscent of, prescient of 9/11 is not lost on me.<sup>54</sup>

It is possible to argue that the stage-managed quality of the Queen Regent's demolition, with its attendant audience braying for drama, brings a kind of formality and order to the hotel's collapse entirely different from the chaos produced by the collapse of the World Trade Center on 11 September. However, there is an air of anarchism to the Queen Regent's demise as the demolition men's organized destruction goes wrong and a young thug armed with a brick in a carrier bag vandalizes Frank's car. More importantly perhaps, there is an intellectual engagement with the description of the hotel's collapse that has been stripped from the endlessly replayed footage of the Twin Towers' destruction, replays that turned its collapse into grotesque and macabre entertainment. As Ken Paulson pointed out in his chapter for *Crisis Journalism: A Handbook For Media Response*, television companies were not immune to the realization that the 9/11 attacks made electrifying footage: '... there were far too many replays of the second plane hitting the World Trade Center.'<sup>55</sup> It is an interesting trade-off. Over-use has divested the Twin Towers' collapse of meaning, while Ford's precise and meaningful narrative has gone largely unrecognized.

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<sup>54</sup> RF interviewed by CLP.

<sup>55</sup> Paulson, *Crisis Journalism*, p. 46.

## Part Two: Redemption and narrative

'There is a land of the living and a land of the dead, and the bridge is love. The only survival, the only meaning'

Tony Blair

Tony Blair, British Prime Minister in 2001, had to choose which reading to give at the memorial service for the British victims of the 9/11 attacks. It was presumably deemed essential that it should be inclusive, consoling and redemptive in spirit, but not monotheistic or even covertly religious. The passage he selected was the final section from *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, written by Thornton Wilder and published in 1927. When a bridge above a gorge in Peru collapses, killing five people, the book's purpose becomes to examine whether there is any meaning beyond the individual's short existence. This is the section that Tony Blair read:

But soon we will die, and all memories of those five will have left earth, and we ourselves shall be loved for a while and forgotten. But the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. Even memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living and a land of the dead, and the bridge is love. The only survival, the only meaning.<sup>56</sup>

At the same church service, the UK ambassador Sir Christopher Meyer, extrapolating from the theme that 'love will have been enough', read a message from the Queen that included the line 'Grief is the price we pay for love'. To underline the effectiveness of Blair's and Meyer's choice of words, Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair's Director of Communications, reported that they resonated with former US President Bill Clinton. Clinton, who was sitting in the

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<sup>56</sup> Thornton Wilder, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927; London: Penguin, 2006), p.127.

front row of the church with Blair, asked Campbell afterwards if he had written Meyer's line. 'I said I'd love to take credit, but no. He said find the guy who did, and hire him.'<sup>57</sup> It seemed that Blair achieved something with his rhetoric that few others managed. The political commentator Andrew Rawnsley, in noting that Blair chose Wilder as his source material, suggested that the British Prime Minister singled himself out:

There was [...] a unique quality to Blair's response to 9/11. This was in part simply because his public performances were so masterly. The Washington Post opined that he and Rudolph Giuliani, the Mayor of New York, were the two political figures 'who broke through the world's stunned disbelief'.<sup>58</sup>

Thornton Wilder, the author who enabled Blair to break through the 'stunned disbelief', is perhaps best known for *Our Town*, said to be the most frequently performed play in American schools. His status informs a cheeky piece of real-estate inventiveness in *The Lay of the Land*. Frank coins the epithet 'Thornton Wilders' to define all those idyllic 'Our Town' properties that people most desire in their dreams but don't necessarily intend or even wish to buy: in the published novel Clare Suddruth would be 'more at home in a built-out Greek revival or a rambling California split-level. "Thornton Wilders", we call these in our trade...'<sup>59</sup> In an earlier draft, Ford writes that Suddruth 'would be more comfortable in a big solid Dutch Colonial or a rambling late-Georgian vernacular. "Thornton Wilders," we call these in our business ...'<sup>60</sup> The chosen nostalgic, anachronistic architecture is different in both publications, but the meaning is the same, speaking as it does of continuity, of security and simpler times.

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<sup>57</sup> Alastair Campbell, *The Burden of Power: Countdown to Iraq, The Alastair Campbell Diaries* (2012; London: Arrow Books, 2013), p. 22.

<sup>58</sup> Andrew Rawnsley, *The End of the Party: the rise and fall of New Labour* (London: Penguin, 2010), p. 37.

<sup>59</sup> Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, p. 273.

<sup>60</sup> Richard Ford, *Exclusive extract from The Lay of The Land: Special edition for Richard Ford's UK Tour December 2004*, produced by OSCAR (South East Literature Promoters Network), courtesy of Random House Publishers.

In the acknowledgements to *The Lay of the Land* Ford pays gracious thanks to Helen Schwartz, the author of *The New Jersey House*, for her 'essential writing' on the state's buildings. Helen Schwartz is the acknowledged authority on the architecture of New Jersey. When I asked her if she had ever heard of a 'Thornton Wilder' house, she said 'there is no architectural style or reference to Thornton Wilder in New Jersey, or anywhere else for that matter.'<sup>61</sup> Ford appears to have simply made the term up in order to harness both the idea of American-ness and its attendant dream, as well as to invoke, possibly, the much publicized and much discussed occasion on New York's Fifth Avenue when Tony Blair deployed Thornton Wilder's words to evoke a sense of continuity and meaning. Indeed, when questioned Ford told me that he had invented the Thornton Wilder architectural vernacular entirely:

It's because I once acted in *Our Town*. I played George Gibbs and we had a stage set with a certain kind of architecture. And in the course of the novel's trajectory I ascribed the Thornton Wilder to that certain kind of architecture in an early draft. When I got around to finish it and knowing that I had to take credit for it, I would hold the space up and get a lot more precise about what I meant. [The Thornton Wilder evokes] small town, cosy, fire in the fireplace, steak on the table. Home Town. Something conservative and redemptive'.<sup>62</sup>

This is of course an instance of elision between Ford and Frank, to the point that Ford often forgets where the divisions lie. This merging of identities occurs when Ford/Frank are treated at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

[The Mayo Clinic] is heaven for me. That's where I will go when I die. It's this great Olympus for salubrity which I like. I like to go to a place where all of my worries can be addressed. It's a huge institution. It's like the British Museum. It's gigantic. Richard went there in that first instance. So Frank went with him. What happens to me is that I think it will be really fun, or whatever fun might be, to describe a place or dedicate sentences to a place as though I were describing it. That's why part of

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<sup>61</sup> Helen Schwartz interviewed by CLP, March 2007.

<sup>62</sup> RF interviewed by CLP.

*Independence Day* and all of *The Lay of the Land* happened on the Shore, which is of course now gone. Because I wanted to locate things there. It didn't have any other particular interest for me other than I went there and had a good time and I thought it would be fun to take Frank there. I've been to the Mayo Clinic various times. That's where I got my throat cut<sup>63</sup>, in the Mayo Clinic. So I thought I have to write about this place because I like it. I need to set something there.<sup>64</sup>

Only two days before our interview, Richard Ford said that he had written another episode in Frank's life, this time involving the death of his dog. It is a dog incidentally that Frank does not have in the trilogy. The reason he was driven to write about how Frank would feel if he lost his dog is because Ford himself lost his dog a few days before. Once again, the elision is there:

People ask me 'what's Frank doing now' and I say he isn't doing anything. There is no Frank. Frank lives in a big, thick notebook in my freezer. I have enough to write two more novels if I wanted to. I met this wonderful child last night named Ali Smith<sup>65</sup> and one of the things that we agreed about is that we keep all our important papers in the freezer. [...] If the house burns down the freezer will probably not burn. I put them in plastic so they don't get all wet. [...] There's lots and lots of Frank left. I put 'F.B.' and I circle it in my notebook. Something that he would say or he would think or something that would interest him. Or something that someone would say that he would respond to. Or something that might happen – anything like that.<sup>66</sup>

Asked when he last wrote 'F.B.' in the margin he replied: 'Wednesday. My dog died so I sat down and I wrote down some notes that Frank might think if *his* dog died. It was very sad. He was old. He was 15 and a half years old.

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<sup>63</sup> During investigative treatment for cancer.

<sup>64</sup> RF interviewed by CLP.

<sup>65</sup> Novelist Ali Smith.

<sup>66</sup> RF interviewed by CLP.

Nonetheless I wrote that down. Pirated poor Scooter's demise and gave him to Frank.<sup>67</sup>

If Frank is to be reinvigorated, Ford concedes that it will have to be short. The effort involved would, he said, be too demanding otherwise:

Finishing *The Lay of the Land*, was, until I finished *Canada*, the hardest thing I ever did. And I certainly wouldn't want to get involved in something that hard again. And so I would have to be able to dream up something that would be easier, knowing full well that the finishing of a novel – the six months in which you're editing it – the reading it until you're blue in the face, is always going to be horrible. I would have to come upon something that was short, sort of like Updike's little novella that he wrote at the end of the Rabbit trilogy. He wrote that one practically posthumously. A scintillating little novella. If I could think of something like that to do, I would just do it. Because I know there's a readership out there for it. If I wrote something that was good and it would make people who care about those things think that they had something to read.<sup>68</sup>

This notion of the 'something to read' is subtly connected to the idea of the salving, engrossing power of narrative. The sense that Ford described as the 'transit to a better state.' When he started to write *The Sportswriter*, his wife questioned his method:

Kristina said to me, 'why don't you write about somebody who's happy. She said, 'you've written these two novels about people who are so profoundly *unhappy*'. And I thought it was a really good idea. And I sat down and I thought, how can I write about somebody who's happy? And the only way I could figure out how to do it would be to deposit someone who was unhappy – his wife had left him, his kid had died, living alone –

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<sup>67</sup> RF interviewed by CLP.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.



and find a way for him to make a transit to some better state. Which I did. I did do that.<sup>69</sup>

It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that Ford found himself unable to write about the specifics of 9/11, to allow his characters to make that 'transit to a better place.' He is less than flattering about those novelists who have dared to try:

I started to read DeLillo, and then it really didn't interest me very much, so I just set it aside. McInerney's<sup>70</sup> I didn't read. Maybe, without even knowing why I say this, there are so many more ways to go wrong than to go right. One of the things that you do when you write a novel is that basically you commandeer and dominate it and you subordinate it to your own uses. And I guess I haven't thought there was anything about 9/11 that I could sufficiently subordinate to my own uses. Because of the scale of the event and the fact that it's so 'known'. And partly because it seems to be more heavy-lifting than I felt able to do. In the ten plus years since then I've been writing a novel almost all of the time and I just didn't get around to it. I might. But I find myself thinking, really, really? Write that?<sup>71</sup>

Asked about his view of Paul Auster, Clare Messud and Mohsin Hamid's attempts to write fictionally about 9/11, he was similarly dismissive:

Paul Auster doesn't interest me as a writer. I just don't want to read him. It's hard enough to see this table, and then to have to imagine it's not here. I just don't want to read it. It's a perfectly reasonable aesthetic way of finding something to write about, but I just don't want to read it. [...Clare Messud] I will read. But I won't finish it if I don't like it. Throw it across the room. Throw it in the fireplace. I read a lot but I don't read in an orderly way, like I was a stakeholder in any way. I just read. [Mohsin

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<sup>69</sup> RF interviewed by CLP.

<sup>70</sup> Jay McInerney, *The Good Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).

<sup>71</sup> RF interviewed by CLP.

Hamid] no, that wears me out. It's too soon. They jumped on it too soon. It was too soon then.<sup>72</sup>

Ford's dismissiveness about other 9/11 novels does not mean that he had a neater, better solution to the problem he perceived that it was 'too soon'. It was while wrestling with the problems of representation that journalists had reached for the salving power of storytelling and narrative, in an attempt to bring purpose and resolution and this, finally, was what Ford reached for too. The *Boston Globe* columnist and Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Don Murray put this craving into words in his contribution to a book published by the American Press Institute, the organisation founded by newspaper publishers in 1946:

I needed facts in the confusion following the attacks, but even more I needed stories, narratives that ordered experience and instructed me on how to behave in the face of tragedy. I found myself reading editorials and op-ed opinions, background and interpretive articles, poems and letters to the editor as much as hard news.<sup>73</sup>

Murray, Tony Blair and Ford were all struggling with the same conundrum; how to grant post-death meaning to the lives of those who perished, even though on the face of it there was no meaning, no sense at all. The method used by all three – journalist, politician and novelist – to grant meaning, finally, was storytelling. Those 'real' people who died so horribly in the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001 had to be transmuted into fictional icons for those of us who did not know them to bring any sense to their lives at all. This fictional/factional transaction began as the *New York Times*' expeditious solution to a problem. There was no list of the dead. How could the dead be described if no one knew for sure who they were? The newspaper launched a section called 'Portraits of Grief'<sup>74</sup>. There it was that the fragments of life that make up a person were displayed; what they liked to cook, the jokes they loved

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<sup>72</sup> RF interviewed by CLP.

<sup>73</sup> Don Murray, 'Behaving in the face of tragedy', in *Crisis Journalism: A Handbook for Media Response*, p. ii.

<sup>74</sup> The *New York Times*' 'Portraits of Grief' have been widely quoted and much cited in the literature about 9/11. They also feature in DeLillo's *Falling Man* and, as 'Relatives' Ruminations' in Amy Waldman's novel *The Submission*.

to tell, the furniture they wanted to buy. As reported in *Journalism After September 11* ‘...the newspaper offered touching vignettes about people who had perished during the attacks, focusing not on their major accomplishments but on some mundane but humanistic area of interest.’<sup>75</sup> This was a process of turning real people into mythological figures, fictive characters, people with an *after*-life. By mythologizing the dead, meaning and redemption were grasped for, where none had been before.

Ford put things another way: that fiction is redemptive certainly, but in a way that could be described as distracting:

Any piece of fiction, any piece of art, has a redemptive function in the most basic ways. That it directs the reader’s attention away from whatever he’s thinking about, to something else, and says, in a kind of appeal, look at this, look at that. And that redeems the moment. Taking your mind off whatever it is, good, bad [...] And then there is the notion that ‘this was made for you’. I’ve made it as well as I can make it. And then there is the notion that there will implicitly be a future in which these things will live on and you can have access to them again and so in all of those fundamental ways they seem redemptive. But it needn’t be that you get to the end of the novel and the birds come down and Heidi comes down from the mountain.<sup>76</sup>

Fiction’s ability to impart things that journalism does not or cannot, is in part the legacy of our growing mistrust of politicians and what they say. The severed pact between politician and reporter which led Tony Blair to choose ‘feral beasts’ as his new epithet for journalists when he left office, has left a vacuum in which facts, truths and falsehoods all float unchallenged or at least unverifiable. The Washington-based journalist and author Ron Suskind, quoting an aide to President George W. Bush, took the question of what is true and what is not a whole stage further. The aide, in an audacious and much-quoted piece of braggadocio, suggested that there is no such thing as the truth at all, simply a new ‘reality’. The aide suggested to Suskind that journalists were

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<sup>75</sup> McChesney, ‘Introduction’, *Journalism After September 11*, p. 8.

<sup>76</sup> RF interviewed by CLP.

wrong to believe that by studying things closely an absolute meaning would emerge:

“That’s not the way the world really works anymore.... We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”<sup>77</sup>

Marc Redfield, citing the Suskind article, suggests that such a ‘dream of godlike sovereignty’<sup>78</sup> even manages to outdo the ‘phantasmic speech act’ of inventing the rhetorical impossibility of a ‘war on terror’. Certainly, the concept that the world’s only superpower can create its own reality when it chooses to, and can subsequently invent another layer to the created reality before we have a chance to catch up, is not one that presidential aides normally admit to.

In February 2003, when addressing the UN Security Council about Iraq’s supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction, the then US Secretary of State Colin Powell promised that ‘every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources. These are not assertions. What we’re giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence.’ Perhaps if he had adopted the unnamed aide’s strategy of crowing that truth was not a necessary component in all of this, then Colin Powell’s reputation would not have been so damaged. His audience would simply have accepted the notion posited by Steve Padley that there is a ‘crisis of representation in the modern world,’<sup>79</sup> a crisis increased by the media with ‘its capacity to create versions of reality that acquired authoritative status.’<sup>80</sup> It should be said that the media was aided in its ‘capacity to create versions of reality’ by a President who was a recidivist when

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<sup>77</sup> Ron Suskind, *New York Times Magazine*, 17 October 2004.  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/17BUSH.html>> [accessed 4 May 2008].

<sup>78</sup> Marc Redfield, *The Rhetoric of Terror: Reflections on 9/11 and the War on Terror* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), p. 51.

<sup>79</sup> Steve Padley, *Key Concepts in Contemporary Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2006), p. 179.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

it came to manipulating the truth. His speech on board an aircraft carrier, declaring the end of major fighting in Iraq, received wide coverage in May 2003. It soon emerged that Bush was flown the short distance to the ship by jet wearing flight dress. The USS Abraham Lincoln was then turned around so that Bush could be filmed with the cinematic open sea as his backdrop, rather than the more prosaic San Diego coastline. His aides had claimed initially that he was forced to fly by jet, and therefore to wear the macho clothing, rather than by helicopter wearing civilian clothes because the aircraft carrier was too far out to sea.<sup>81</sup> The distance from ship to shore turned out to be thirty-nine miles.

The instability of language and, indeed, fact has led some news organizations to demand greater precision in its use. Take for example the BBC, much mocked by the right-wing press for advising its journalists to avoid using the word 'terrorist'. The internal guidelines read as follows:

careful use of the word "terrorist" is essential if the BBC is to maintain its reputation for standards of accuracy and especially impartiality. This is especially true when we use the word to describe a person or a group as opposed to an action or event ("the terrorist group", say, as opposed to "an act of terror" or "terrorist tactics" or "terrorism"). That does not mean we should emasculate our reporting or otherwise avoid conveying the reality and horror of what has occurred; but we should consider the impact our use of language may have on our reputation for objective journalism amongst our many audiences.<sup>82</sup>

Take too the words of the journalist and commentator Robert Fisk, pointed up by Karim H. Karim.<sup>83</sup> Fisk writes that:

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<sup>81</sup> John King, 'Administration defends Bush flight to carrier', *CNN International*, 8 May 2003  
<<http://edition.cnn.com/2003/ALLPOLITICS/05/07/bush.lincoln/>> [accessed 4 May 2008].

<sup>82</sup> BBC Editorial Guidelines: 'Guidance, Terrorism, Use of Language When Reporting, Background'.  
<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/advice/terrorism/language/>> [accessed 4 May 2008].

<sup>83</sup> Karim H. Karim, 'Making Sense of the "Islamic Peril"', *Journalism After September 11*, p. 102.

‘terrorism’ no longer means terrorism. It is not a definition; it is a political contrivance. ‘Terrorists’ are those who use violence against the side that is using the word. The only terrorists whom Israel acknowledges are those who oppose Israel. The only terrorists the United States acknowledges are those who oppose the United States or their allies. The only terrorists Palestinians acknowledge – for they too use the word – are those opposed to the Palestinians.’<sup>84</sup>

But what use are efforts to tell a ‘better’, more precise truth if our default position is to disbelieve it when we hear it? In any event, there will always be tangled skeins of misinformation at times of crisis, either through lack of information or through too much unproven information that has yet to be sorted and filtered. In addition and perhaps inevitably, there will always be a craving for storytelling. A slight but revealing example occurred on 30 June 2007. The BBC presenter Clare Balding, interviewing a woman on Radio 5Live about the attack on Glasgow Airport’s Terminal Building, asked the eyewitness what she had seen. The purpose of the interview was to garner the facts, but the eyewitness included a reference in her description to the fact that she and her sister had gone to the airport to meet their father; she had been separated from them both in the chaos. Balding, distracted by the story, asked, ‘*Did you find them?*’ In the face of a terrorist attack on a British airport, following on from three car bomb attempts in London, Balding was beguiled by the small but compelling narrative of a woman temporarily separated from her family.

The factual reporting of the events leading up to and beyond the terrorist attacks of 9/11 was embellished by something more sinister than narrative. Posing as facts, news reports were fabricated from rumour; sometimes they were made up entirely of it and seasoned with a heavy dose of psychic paranoia. Newspapers reported that the Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden was driven by rage at his sexual inadequacy<sup>85</sup> and that Nostrodamus had

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<sup>84</sup> Robert Fisk, *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001), p. 441.

<sup>85</sup> S. Elizabeth Bird, ‘Taking it Personally: Supermarket tabloids after September 11’, *Journalism After 9/11*, p. 151.

predicted the collapse of the Twin Towers.<sup>86</sup> Stephen O’Leary, in the *Online Journalism Review*, noted that within twenty-four hours of the 9/11 attacks ‘over one hundred of the 120 students in my class at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School had received emails containing the spurious Nostradamus prophecy.’<sup>87</sup> The misinformation, rumour and invented realities were manifold. Despite the notable attempts being made at the BBC and elsewhere for a new precision in language and meaning, the least reliable journalist will always turn to fiction or at the very least, cliché. The place where a man has killed six people in a domestic dispute is called ‘the killing fields’, the scene of a bomb explosion is ‘a war zone’ and ‘tonight’s main headlines’ becomes ‘our top *stories* tonight.’ It is my contention that whereas contemporary fiction’s power is being enhanced by our mistrust of journalism, journalism will be diminished by its flirtation with fiction.

A few days after 9/11 Ford was asked to contribute his reflections on the attacks to the *New York Times*. He began by describing his father’s death more than forty years before and is precise and graphic in his description of smelling the ‘large, sweaty body’ and ‘flaccid self, loose-limbed and malleable...’ But Ford concluded in a way that seemed far removed from the crystalline, unsentimental prose that his readers had become used to:

It is an axiom of the novelist’s grasp on reality that a death’s importance is measured by the significance of the life that has ended. Thus to die, as so many did on Sept. 11 – their singular existences briefly obscured – may seem to cloud and invalidate life entirely. Yet their lives, though amazingly lost, remain indelible and will not by simple death be undone. They live still, and importantly in all but the most literal ways.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Stuart Allan, ‘Reweaving the Internet’, *Journalism After 9/11*, pp. 133-134.

<sup>87</sup> Stephen O’Leary, ‘Rumors of Grace and Terror’, *Online Journalism Review*, University of Southern California, 2 April 2004. <<http://www.ojr.org/ojr/ethics/1017782038.php>> [accessed 4 May 2008].

<sup>88</sup> Richard Ford, ‘The Attack Took More Than the Victims’ Lives. It Took Their Deaths’, *New York Times*, 23 September 2001, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/23/magazine/23WWLN.html>> [accessed 30 March 2013].

The sentiments echo those expressed by Tony Blair at the memorial service in New York, although unlike Wilder, Ford is not prepared to grant that even memory itself is not necessary. I will reflect on Ford's choice of words later in this chapter, but in his definition of the ultimate significance of the victims' lives, he is in fact expressing a view that is *anti*-axiomatic of the novelist's grasp on reality. He is granting them 'indelible' lives despite their lives' lack of 'significance' and the pointlessness of their deaths.

Unlike Frank, whom Ford finessed for thirty years, thereby giving him 'significance', the victims of 9/11 were largely unknown and unknowable in the immediate aftermath of the attack. Ford's attempt to make them 'indelible' merely by saying that they were is neither convincing nor comforting. As I have demonstrated, Blair's and Ford's attempts focused in part on the notion of transcendence; they too, like Don Murray of the *Boston Globe*, relied to a large degree on the redemptive power of narrative and the order that it can bring. This is why Blair turned to the unifying force of fiction for his address and why Ford argued perversely that the dead 'live still, and importantly in all but the most literal ways.' In my view, Ford's reinvigoration of the victims, his salving drive to give them back their lives 'in all but the most literal ways', is little more than semi-dextrous sleight of hand. Ironically, the eternal life he attempts to grant them is no more real, no more solid than the 'life' he granted Frank Bascombe. Unless of course we should deduce from his attempt to grant fictional status to the dead that Ford is bestowing upon them his highest honour. He is, after all, not immune to turning his own life into narrative, to fictionalizing himself. Could it be that this is the conscious act of a man who finds little of permanence and little of purpose in a 'literal' life? He is a writer who elected never to have children and appears to draw diminishing enjoyment from the act of writing itself. What legacy will there be for him, other than the fictional? He is a much-interviewed man, the consequence, in part, of his drive to ensure that no one misunderstands or misinterprets what he has written. 'I don't want you to think that something is funny when it's serious. I don't want you to think the opposite of what I understand the sentence to mean. If a story



does that, if a story somehow invites the reader to kind of go off onto some tangent well then the story has failed as far as I'm concerned.'<sup>89</sup>

I suspect there is an additional aspect to this level of control. Ford wants to be the master not just of his own destiny but his own history. Although he demands of his readers that we do not misunderstand his prose, he is very happy to embellish his *own* story. One of the anecdotes he is fond of telling in interviews, and one which interviewers lazily delight in allowing him to tell repeatedly, is the incident in which he and his wife took the new novel written by a woman who had reviewed *The Sportswriter* poorly and shot a hole through it with a pistol. The novelist in question was Alice Hoffman, although Ford usually pretends not to remember, adding to the narrative power of his own story. For him to say precisely which book he and his wife shot would be mere news reporting; to claim to have forgotten is enticing drama. To enhance the fictional aspect of the story he likes to add that the bullet-pierced book sits boldly on an editor's shelf at Knopf in New York, Ford's very own piece of 'indelible' personal fiction.

But by the time Ford came to complete the text of *The Lay of the Land*, his ideas on indelibility had moved on, shaped in part by the unleashing of another catastrophic attack on America's shores. As I have suggested, his three novel epitaph to the prosperous, comfortable, middle class life of suburban America is incrementally more violent, more threatening and more bleak. The attacks of 9/11 clearly influenced Ford's ways of writing and thinking. But there was another devastating attack upon America's security and confidence that I believe consolidated his sense of dread, and that is equally important in terms of its effect upon his work. It was this attack, on New Orleans, which finally shaped his views on death and the meaning that a novelist can bring to it.

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<sup>89</sup> RF interviewed by Jill Kitson, ABC Radio National, 4 January 2003.  
<<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/linguafranca/stories/2003/1224102.htm>> [accessed 4 May 2008].

### Part Three: Hurricane Katrina's legacy

Literature is news that STAYS news<sup>90</sup>  
Ezra Pound

On 29 August 2005, as Richard Ford was finalising the manuscript of *The Lay of the Land*, a natural catastrophe hit the American city of New Orleans. It was a disaster that led Ford to discard any attempts to grant eternal life to those who died in 9/11. Hurricane Katrina, which killed almost 2,000 people, flooded 80% of New Orleans and caused damage estimated at \$90 billion, was the costliest natural disaster ever to hit the United States. It was an assault on an American city that could be equated, Ford implied, with the attack on New York in 2001. This was a city of huge importance to Ford: he had lived in New Orleans both as a child and as an adult; he owned a house there and he wrote part of *The Lay of the Land* there.<sup>91</sup> His wife, Kristina, to whom all his novels are dedicated, was, for eight years, the New Orleans Director of City Planning.

Ford, by his own admission, struggled to find a vocabulary to express the loss of his city. This was not the noble attempt by one of America's leading novelists to give voice to a national craving for explanation, although there is a much-used journalistic convention that fiction writers such as Ford should be invited to express the inexpressible at such times. It was personal. And even he, the master of the hyper-hyphenated, extravagantly redolent and meaning-crammed noun, found it a struggle. For a writer so precise in his choice of vocabulary, so unforgiving of poor prose, his own struggle to express his sense of bereavement was uncharacteristically confused and confusing. Even though he pointed to the losses suffered by others, Ford's sense of American

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<sup>90</sup> Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (1934; New York: New Directions Publishing, 2010), p. 29.

<sup>91</sup> McGrath, *New York Times* 25 October 2006, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/25/books/25ford.html?fta=y>> [accessed 4 May 2008].

exceptionalism, reinforced by the narratives of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, seemed implicit:

An attempt to advance a vocabulary for empathy and for reckoning is frustrated in a moment of sorest need by the plain terms of the tragedy that wants explaining. ... In America, even with our incommensurable memories of 9/11, we still do not have an exact human vocabulary for the loss of a city – our great, iconic city, so graceful, livable, insular, self-delighted, eccentric ... Other peoples have experienced their cities' losses. Some bombed away (by us). ... Our inept attempts at words only run to lists, costs, to assessing blame. It's like Hiroshima a public official said. But, no. It's not like anything. It's what it is. That's the hard part. He, with all of us, lacked the words.<sup>92</sup>

Ford found that this time he could not grant any form of life to the victims, fictional, mythic or otherwise. Such a failure was not what had been expected of him, and I asked him how his lack of words had been greeted:

I wrote something in that essay about being beyond the reach of empathy. A lot of people complained to me about that. Not that it made any difference to me. What I was trying to get across was that sometimes things happen and they eradicate your vocabulary by which you might be able to express those things. [...] I wasn't conceding defeat. But I guess that you can write and concede defeat and once you concede defeat you still have to finish what you write, so your defeat is transcended by whatever it is that you wanted to say... There's something very aggressive about writing a book, something very aggressive about writing a poem, something about writing an essay, which basically wants to say to people, 'no, no, no stop what you're doing. Do this. Quit doing this. Do that. There's something abrading about that. Whatever you're doing that's interesting, look what I did. I don't want to dominate the room, but there is an impulse to want to control stuff. I like to control stuff.

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<sup>92</sup> Richard Ford, 'Elegy for My City', *Observer*, 4 September 2005, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/sep/04/hurricanekatrina.features>> [accessed 25 March 2013].

Control the material. The novel is good when there's no discrepancy between what the novelist is meaning for you to understand and what you understand. If there's a big discrepancy, something is wrong. I try to write sentences that don't let you out.<sup>93</sup>

Given his failure to find a vocabulary to express the assault on his city of New Orleans, where does that leave his contention that there should be no discrepancy between writer's meaning and reader's understanding? It is my belief that when Ford revised the manuscript for *The Lay of the Land*, prior to its publication in 2006, he used that lack of vocabulary, that lack of specificity, to express a generalized sense of his own loss, both about New Orleans and the Twin Towers. His lack of words contributed to his final text's meaning. And how much more powerful it was than his journalistic attempt in 2001 to grant eternal life to those he knew had no such thing. A comparison between the preliminary and finished texts of *The Lay of the Land* makes that clear.

In December 2004 Ford was sent on a pre-publication UK tour by his publisher Random House. To give him something to read at the literary events they had organized, his publicists printed a small pamphlet containing an extract from an early draft of *The Lay of the Land*.<sup>94</sup> The events were planned somewhat eccentrically in Swindon, Milton Keynes, Brighton, Bracknell, Winchester, Fareham and Maidenhead. (Ford used Maidenhead to questionable comic effect in the final manuscript of *The Lay of the Land*, exposing his inability to define a world outside America. His attempt to depict British-ness has a hollow, formulaic ring. Sally arrives in Maidenhead, having left Mull, a place that allows Ford to play half-heartedly with the idea of 'mulling' things over. Writing to Frank, she says "I am in a place called Maidenhead ... in J.O.E. (Jolly Old England). Talk about wanting to go back in time! I've come all the way back to Maidenhead. From Mull to Maidenhead. That's a hoot."<sup>95</sup> The extract that Ford's publicists selected for him to read came from what was to become Chapter 9 of the published novel, but is simply called *The Shore* in the

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<sup>93</sup> RF interviewed by CLP.

<sup>94</sup> *Special edition for Richard Ford's UK Tour December 2004*, OSCAR (South East Literature Promoters Network), courtesy of Random House Publishers.

<sup>95</sup> Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, p. 382.

pamphlet. A few pages before this section begins in the novel, Ford sets his context, describing the ‘whole deluging, undifferentiated crash-in of modern existence American-style, whose sudsy, brown tree-trunk-littered surface most of us somehow manage to keep our heads above so we can see our duty and do it.’<sup>96</sup> Anyone who has seen television pictures of the days after New Orleans was swallowed by water can testify to the precision of this description, although many people trying to keep their heads above the ‘tree-trunk-littered surface’ had succumbed to the brown, stinking water and drowned.

The ‘crash-in’ of modern existence American-style is the essence of *The Lay of the Land*, gloomily macro-lensed down from the wide-angle vision of *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*. And ‘the sudsy, brown tree-trunk-littered surface’ sets the scene for the extract that Richard Ford read aloud on his UK tour. The scene focuses on Mr Clare Suddruth, a 65-year-old Viet vet with ‘Clint Eastwood features’. Clare is trying to buy a beach house for his first wife, whom he divorced to marry his second, whom he in turn divorced too. In the pamphlet, the beach town where Frank lives, works and where he is attempting to sell Clare a house, is called Sea-Brite. It is a perky, hyphenated name, just as Frank’s company Realty-Wise is, and it gleams with the promise of white incisors and orthodontic hygiene. As Ford admitted, ‘The copy editors gave me a hard time about the hyphen... They argued that very few place names in America are hyphenated. But I said that this was a town invented by land developers, and they would definitely want the hyphen.’<sup>97</sup> By the time of the official publication of *The Lay of the Land*, Sea-Brite’s promise has contracted and it is now called Sea-Cliff. The jaunty property-developer’s hyphen is still there – but Brite has become Clift, bringing with it a sense of confrontation with the ocean, rather than an invigorating, cleansing pact with clear, lapping waves. Clift suggests the cracking, the cleaving of rock, of splitting, as well as a sense of division. The biblical connection with the word ‘cleft’ brings a sense of aggression and retribution. The topographical reference to a cliff with its high,

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<sup>96</sup> Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, p. 224.

<sup>97</sup> McGrath, *New York Times*, 25 October 2006

<[http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/25/books/25ford.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/25/books/25ford.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)>  
[accessed 28 January 2013].

flat rocky face set against the incoming ocean sets up an altogether more threatening and confrontational tone.

The substance of this section of both the novel and of the pamphlet deals with Clare Suddruth's suspicion that the beach chalet Frank is attempting to sell him has cracked concrete foundations and will ultimately succumb to the force of the wind and the salty waves. In both publications Clare Suddruth explains the dangers inherent in a house perched so unwisely on the sea front. '...because it's on the ocean, salt and moisture go to work on it. And suddenly – though it isn't sudden of course – Hurricane Frank blows up, a high tide comes in, the force of the water turns savage and Bob's your uncle.' The words are identical, save for an extra '*boom*' inserted for theatrical effect in the pamphlet but removed from the more sober final novel. The sense is clear that a 'high tide' could be devastating.

Looking to the pamphlet again, we see that the 'steely-blue, flat-surfaced Atlantic is beyond the wide low-tide beach. ... In the middle distance, a boatful of day fishermen is anchored, their short poles abristle off both sides.' But turn to the published novel and we find this; 'Lavender flat-surfaced ocean stretches beyond the wide high-tide beach. Breeze seems to stream straight though my ears and gives me a shiver.' The threatening *high* tide has arrived and the jaunty photogenic fishermen on their day trip have been excised from the scene. Both versions are heavy with suggestions of cracked foundations, of threat, of terrorism. Clare speculates about what might happen to the country which would 'make just normal not possible again.' Both publications were written after the 9/11 attacks and both sections contain the same references to the anxiety that New Jersey could be a 'target for some nut with a bomb', but it is only the final version, re-written after Hurricane Katrina struck, which contains the sense that *environmental* terror is not just on its way, it's here.<sup>98</sup>

The acknowledged low-point of George W. Bush's two-term presidency came when he failed to respond with leadership, compassion or even speed to the crisis caused in New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina. The *New York Times*

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<sup>98</sup> Hurricane Katrina hit the US coast only 8 months after the Indian Ocean earthquake triggered tsunamis that killed 225,000 people in 11 countries.

Editorial from 1 September 2005 berated him for making one of the ‘worst speeches of his life’, complaining that during his Rose Garden address he had read out a ‘long laundry list of supplies, grinned and promised that everything would work out in the end.’<sup>99</sup> The scene that has become emblematic of George W. Bush’s presidency was of him, safely seated in Air Force One, flying briefly over the flooded roads and streets of the drowning city. The people trying to keep their heads above the ‘sudsy, brown’ water and holding up their arms in pleading distress would have looked tiny to him as he looked out of his window. Literally overlooked. He could not know what they were enduring because he did not descend to ground level to speak to them. The White House staffer Scott McClellan famously quoted the president’s breathtakingly inadequate response: ‘It’s devastating. It’s got to be doubly devastating on the ground.’<sup>100</sup>

There is a long tradition of the spectator as contented survivor, not just relishing the fact that he is not suffering, but actively enjoying the suffering of others. Hans Blumenberg, in *Shipwreck with Spectator*, makes reference to the work of Montaigne, who argued that the spectator of a shipwreck is justified in the pleasure that he feels, (described as ‘volupté maligne’, or malicious and sensual pleasure) by his ‘successful self-preservation. By virtue of his capacity for this distance, he stands unimperiled on the solid ground of the shore. He survives through one of his useless qualities: the ability to be a spectator.’<sup>101</sup> President Bush had a great deal more than the ‘ability’ to be a spectator; he had specific permission to be so. His staff valued his life above any other, both at the time of the 9/11 attacks, when he was ordered to fly away, and at the time of Hurricane Katrina. Once invited to become a spectator he was then able to enjoy his ‘successful self-preservation.’ Blumenberg cites the fifteenth book of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, in which Goethe uses the metaphor of a ship at sea

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<sup>99</sup> ‘Waiting for a Leader’, *New York Times*, 1 September 2005, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/01/opinion/01thu1.html>> [accessed 30 March 2013].

<sup>100</sup> ‘Press Gaggle with Scott McClellan Aboard Air Force One En Route Andrews Air Force Base, MD’, 31 August 2005, *The White House Archives*, <<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/08/20050831-2.html>>

[accessed 30 March 2013].

<sup>101</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1997), p.17.

whose course is wiped clean by the swelling, erasing action of the waves; ‘... as the water that is dislodged by a ship instantly flows in again behind it, so also error, by the law of its nature, when eminent minds have once driven it aside and made room for themselves, very quickly closes up again behind them.’<sup>102</sup> There was a phalanx of White House staff whose job it was to erase the ‘error’ that President Bush made in his response to Hurricane Katrina, to the extent that they argued that the error had not existed at all. Proof indeed that the water ‘very quickly closes up again behind them.’ ‘I reject outright any suggestion that President Bush was anything less than fully involved,’ said his homeland security adviser Frances Fragos Townsend.<sup>103</sup>

Arianna Huffington, the influential Washington political powerbroker and journalist, dubbed Bush’s tenure in office as the ‘Flyover Presidency’<sup>104</sup>. The tactic of the ‘flyover’, or possibly even the ‘fly away’, is the same tactic President Bush adopted on 11 September 2001. His advisors forced him to evacuate by plane, arguing that issues of national security demanded he be kept away from Washington and New York. When he returned briefly to Washington his words were banal at best. In a piece of cosy Texan rhetoric entirely inadequate for the enormity of the event, he promised that he would find those ‘folks’ who had done this thing. I would argue that the vision of the President first flying away and later flying above the fray is the context that Ford had in mind when he talked retrospectively about the frame of mind and the frame of reference he had when he was writing all three books in his trilogy:

I guess it’s my view that if you’re flying over a suburb in a helicopter and see some guy down there schlumming along, he’s probably a Pakistani or Chinese or an African-American. I think suburbanites are not knowable. They are only knowable as literature or art knows them, which is to say up close. ... When I started *The Sportswriter*, I thought to

<sup>102</sup> Goethe, *Aus meinem Leben. Dichtung und Wahrheit*, 3, chap. 15; *Poetry and Truth*, trans. John Oxenhandler (London and Chicago, 1974), p. 298

<sup>103</sup> Frances Fragos Townsend quoted by Spencer S. Hsu, *Washington Post*, 14 February 2006, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/13/AR2006021300679.html>> [accessed 4 May 2008].

<sup>104</sup> Arianna Huffington, ‘The Flyover Presidency of George W. Bush’, *Huffington Post*, 31 August 2005, <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arianna-huffington/the-flyover-presidency-of\\_b\\_6566.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arianna-huffington/the-flyover-presidency-of_b_6566.html)> [accessed 28 May 2013].



myself – how about if I wrote a redemptive novel about the suburbs, a paeon to New Jersey and its suburban life? I realized that not to mouth the conventional line, but instead to think, as Frank does in *The Lay of the Land*, ‘I love this, this is great!’ is to uncover a seam of approval, a seam of optimism, of acceptance that is, in fact, buried in us all.<sup>105</sup>

Ford’s contention that people from the suburbs, or people at all, are ‘only knowable as literature or art knows them, which is to say up close’, runs entirely counter to the kind of news reporting that we have become familiar with, where the telephoto lens and ‘wallpaper’ footage are currency. News reports that do not get ‘up close’ or even go to the scene at all are cheap, so they can be plentiful. And they need to be plentiful when there is so much time to fill.

My certainty that Ford had the president’s shameful New Orleans thirty-five minute fly-over in mind when he defined the way in which literature can actually say more than the facts because it is ‘up close’ is further underlined by Ford’s words in the immediate aftermath of the Hurricane:

From the ruins, it’s not easy to know what’s best to think. Even the President may have felt this way in his low pass over that wide sheet of onyx water, the bobbing rooftops peeking above the surfaces, the vast collapse, the wind-riddled buildings, that little figure (could he see who she was?) standing in the water, and on those rooftops – many black, many poor. Homeless.<sup>106</sup>

That eye-line then, that perspective of the man above looking down on the unknowable and refusing to descend to find out for himself, is thus one we know Ford has considered. That is why the closing page of the final novel in the trilogy is so redolent with meaning. Frank is on an aircraft, bound for the Mayo Clinic so loved by Ford, to find out if his cancer has returned. He looks out of the window, as George W. Bush would have done, and he sees the snow

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<sup>105</sup> RF interviewed by Phil Hogan, *Observer*, 24 September 2006.

<sup>106</sup> Ford, *Observer*, 4 September 2005.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/sep/04/hurricanekatrina.features> [accessed 25 March 2013].

covered landscape below sliced into tiny squares and segments of land. He considers his dead son, his own near death and he recalls his return from hospital after the shooting. When he got home, he stood in the ocean, exactly as his alter ego had done at the end of *The Sportswriter*. The first time around he had the sensation of sloughing off a layer of skin and of experiencing a sense of 'nowness'. 'The nowness of everything'<sup>107</sup> and its 'wondrousness' were the words used by the playwright Dennis Potter to capture that sense of smelling the blossom outside his bedroom window and existing only in that moment. He knew by then that he was close to death, but the glory of the 'now' was magically evoked by the blossom's scent.

At the conclusion of *The Lay of the Land*, which Richard Ford mistakenly believed would be his last 'big book', Frank feels something more than the 'nowness' of his earlier life and this is how he puts it: '*Here is necessity. Here is the extra beat – to live, to live, to live it out.*' It is always possible, unless Ford writes a fourth novel in the sequence, that Frank Bascombe does not have long to live beyond the final page of *The Lay of the Land*. If the bullets have not killed him, the prostate cancer may. The vital point is that Frank's life does not have any transcendent meaning at all. Frank the transactor is not an 'everyman'<sup>108</sup> as interviewers so frequently like to describe him. He is, quite literally, *no-man*. No longer is Ford urging us to believe that Frank or even we ourselves will continue to have life 'in all but the most literal ways'. No longer does he sign up to Thornton Wilder's, Tony Blair's or journalism's disingenuous call for meaning where there can be none. To 'live it out', Frank must adopt the eye-line shunned by President Bush as he circled above New Orleans overlooking his people. Frank's plane starts to descend. 'We are going down fast now. Sally clutches my fingers hard, smiles and encouragement. The big engines hum. Our craft dips shudders hard, and I feel myself afloat as the white earth rises to meet us..... A bump, a roar, a heavy thrust forward into life again, and we resume our human scale upon the land.'<sup>109</sup> This, then, is the redemptive power of the novel.

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<sup>107</sup> 'We tend to forget that life can only be defined in the present tense', *Guardian*, 12 September 2007. Edited interview with Dennis Potter by Melvyn Bragg. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2007/sep/12/greatinterviews> [accessed 15 May 2013].

<sup>108</sup> RF interviewed by Ramona Koval, 4 June 2007.

<sup>109</sup> Ford, *The Lay of the Land*, p. 485.

It is to inhabit life on 'a human scale', not to view it from a safe distance as a President or a journalist might.

When I asked Ford if my assessment of the effect of Hurricane Katrina on his final text was justified his response was characteristically blunt:

Now that you've said it, maybe I will think about it a little bit. But I would also have to go and read those passages again and there's almost nothing that could make me do that. But we're not talking about my intention here. We're talking about your intelligence in trying to connect things that seem important. I don't have to take credit for it. [...] This is interesting to me. It isn't what I was thinking. It's just what I wrote.<sup>110</sup>

Ford's lack of consciousness about how or why he writes extends, a little comically, to *what* he wrote too. On the subject of the two Wallys in Books 1 and 3 of the trilogy, each of whom commits suicide, his response was unexpected: 'Who is Wally in Book 3?' When I reminded him that Wally is Sally's dead husband who appears to die, reappears and then dies again, he still did not remember:

I didn't realize. [...] That's the kind of thing an editor should say. But they didn't. I'm just a regular, plug-along kind of human being. If someone had said there's Wally here and there's Wally there I would have changed that. If you look in Carver stories there are all kinds of people who have similar names or sometimes even the same name. He had an affinity for certain names, just as I have an affinity for certain names. But it doesn't matter. That's the part of writing fiction that I don't really worry about very much. *The Lay of the Land* was published in 2006 and now it's 2012 and this is the first time I've heard about that. I don't think it stops you drawing attention to it. I mean, it's there.<sup>111</sup>

On one level, Ford's absent-mindedness about what he has written is amusing: on another, it reinforces the instinctual nature of the way in which he writes. He

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<sup>110</sup> RF interviewed by CLP.

<sup>111</sup> RF interviewed by CLP.

is not aware that his work has become more solidly real, less dream-like, more contracted than it used to be; although I would argue that it has. His answer to the question of whether he has a growing sense of the real was 'I'm unaware of that. The only way I can connect with that at all is to say that my own personal vocabulary about describing things – windows and trees and mountains and things like that - has been illuminated by realizing that it isn't the thing that matters so much as the language that I use to refer to the thing.'<sup>112</sup> However, there is a more serious point here than the simple forgetfulness of a writer who has written hundreds of thousands of words over more than thirty years. Not only has Frank negotiated the dream period, the transcendental phase and the pragmatic patch, finally devising a consensual and liberating understanding that to 'live it out' will, finally, do: so too has Ford. His novels are subtly imbued with the traumas that have faced and foiled the United States for the past three decades, but the trilogy is defined, ultimately, by the specific crises of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. The fact that he does not always realize how that has come about is immaterial.

Ford asserted that once 9/11 'gets outside the purchase of other writers, of journalism', perhaps he will be able to write more specifically about it. His view of Don DeLillo's attempt to write in specifics about 9/11 was as much mystified as it was critical: '*Falling Man* for instance, I couldn't have brought myself to write that. It's the same way I can't write about my wife. I can't surround that experience in any kind of way to be able to render it.'<sup>113</sup> In the following chapter I will examine the methods being used by other novelists, Don DeLillo included, to 'render' 9/11 in ways that Ford has found not only impossible but absurd.

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> RF interviewed by CLP.

## CHAPTER 2: NARRATIVES OF RETROGENESIS AND ABSTRACTION

### Introduction

The vast events now shaping across the Channel are towering over us too closely and too tremendously to be worked into fiction without a painful jolt in the perspective ...

Virginia Woolf

The whole play of history and power is disrupted by this event, but so, too, are the conditions of analysis. You have to take your time

<sup>1</sup>

Jean Baudrillard

Virginia Woolf's 'jolt in the perspective' was one with which writers wrestling with the events of 9/11 were all too familiar.<sup>2</sup> Richard Ford's view that 9/11 was 'still in the provenance of journalists' was a variation on that theme and was shared by many; reviews of the fiction that emerged relatively swiftly from the dust of 11 September 2001 raised questions about the feasibility of attempting to capture the proceedings of that day so soon after the event. Novelist Michel Faber, asked to comment on the merits of the 9/11 novel, said it might be difficult to judge 'given the strong emotions still swirling around the twin towers catastrophe'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2002; London: Verso, 2012), pp. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Before Midnight', *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 March 1917, Issue 789, p. 789.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Faber, 'A tower of babble', *Guardian*, 4 June 2005, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/jun/04/featuresreviews.guardianreview22>> [accessed 26 March 2013].

If novelists were comparatively slow to engage with the events of 9/11, could it have been because they were timidly heedful of Virginia Woolf's familiar strictures or was it because they doubted their capacity to crystallize a trauma that was already so 'known', so witnessed, so widely disseminated? Certainly the old rules that proscribed writers from fictionalizing the news in 1917 no longer applied. During the First World War, news took weeks, months, years to emerge. To fictionalize that which had yet to be reported was potentially an affront to those seeking verified information about what had happened. It is worth noting that Rebecca West and D. H. Lawrence attempted to write about these events, albeit obliquely, but predominantly fiction was deemed to be a redundant business until the facts had been established.

American Airlines Flight 11 out of Boston crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center at 8.46 a.m. Live pictures of the burning building were being broadcast worldwide inside three minutes. By the time United Airlines Flight 175 from Boston crashed into the South Tower at 9.03, there was no time lag; the calamity occurred and was televised simultaneously. The South Tower collapsed at 9.59, the North at 10.28. At 9.37 American Airlines Flight 77 hit the Pentagon and at 10.03 United Airlines Flight 93 crashed into the ground near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The news was simulcast to hundreds of millions of viewers and listeners across the world. The 'vast events' of Virginia Woolf's day were not 'shaping', they had shaped. However, the difficulty of rendering the events of 9/11 in factual form was clear from the start. Rumours of further explosions and attacks persisted throughout that day and following days. They included the allegation that the assault on the World Trade Center was a Jewish plot and that 4,000 informed Jewish workers failed to appear at their WTC desks on 9/11; that Westminster Abbey in London was hit by an aircraft that day; that eight American planes were hijacked, not four; that United Airlines Flight 93 did not crash in Pennsylvania as a result of the courageous intervention of passengers and crew but that it was shot down by the US military. As I established earlier in this chapter, there were many wild and censorious claims made too about Osama Bin Laden's motivations, which included resentment at his sexual inadequacy. Years later rumours still persist, and are consistently given heady and wide exposure in films, books and the

Internet, that the Twin Towers did not collapse but that they were blown up in controlled explosions.

The creator of the worldwide web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, has decried the Internet's role as the disseminator of rumour, warning that '...on the web the thinking of cults can spread very rapidly and suddenly a cult which was 12 people who had some deep personal issues suddenly find a formula which is very believable. A sort of conspiracy theory [...] which you can imagine spreading to thousands of people and being deeply damaging'.<sup>4</sup> This is 'cultural paranoia', the kind that seeks to rewrite history in order to provide order where there was or is none. Sir Tim is now seeking new ways in which websites can be labelled, an adjustment that would effectively give them a 'truth' rating. But given that the Internet is only available to 20% of the world's population he also asks warningly, 'has it been designed by the West for the West?'<sup>5</sup> Would any truth-o-meter be West-centric? In this chapter I will explore some of these concerns, specifically in relation to the work of novelist Mohsin Hamid who has tried to construct a form of dualistic call and response between East and West.

Given the concurrency of events, dissemination and absorption, it is legitimate to suggest that a different time scale now applies when it comes to the fictionalization of the news. There is no necessity or even responsibility for writers of fiction to delay their response, although there may be reticence about immediacy. The Poundian notion of the *phanopoeia*, the verbal device by which the image is relayed to the visual imagination, takes on a new complexity; the reader needs no mediation from the writer in terms of the image because the image is not just familiar but is deeply ingrained in the psyche. The synaesthetic response of the reader to 9/11's images, sounds and even, in some cases, smells necessitates an approach from the writer that is vested more in narrative and alternative means of expression than it is in physical representation. As I suggested in the previous chapter, it swiftly became clear after 9/11 that there was a need, a craving even, for narrative and for the storification about what had happened: not just a retelling of events, but a form of interpretive,

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<sup>4</sup> Pallab Ghosh, 'Warning sounded on web's future', BBC News, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/7613201.stm>> [accessed 25 March 2013].

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

hermeneutical response. There was a pejorative view that, as Andrew O'Hagan put it, the 'hallmark of those novelists who have tried to write about the attacks is a sort of austere plangency – or a quivering bathos – that has been in evidence almost from the moment the planes hit.'<sup>6</sup> But the important point to note about criticism of this kind is contained within O'Hagan's next sentence. 'Those authors who published *journalistic* accounts immediately after the event failed to see how their metaphors fell dead from their mouths before the astonishing live pictures.'<sup>7</sup> An apparently critical attack on the capacity of novelists to crystallize the vast, traumatic events of 9/11 is in fact an assault on their journalism instead. In this chapter I will develop the notion that although non-fiction, as well as fiction, that responded immediately and invested in dead metaphors failed, the fictional response that has explored not plangency but alternative methods of description, interpretation, depiction has not.

The post-9/11 novels I will examine attempt to secure a small space that may be more meaningful than the literal world in which they find themselves. Crucially, however, none offers either deliberately misleading testimony or wildly inflated dangers, the two extremes that have tended to be the natural end-stops of news journalists for whom the middle ground has always been a by-word for equivocal, muddled or dull. The chapter as a whole concerns itself with the question of the artist's adequacy in confronting the historical event. In Part 1 I examine the novel's potential for temporal experimentation; in Part 2 I assess our relative tolerance of the 'real' in the novel by comparison with sculpture, as well as fiction's drive to provide redemptive connections; in Part 3 I turn to the use of perspectivism and quotidian detail combined with abstraction to find a way to say the apparently unsayable. That is not to say that novelists have succeeded, rather that they have not failed.

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew O'Hagan, 'Racing Against Reality', *New York Review of Books*, vol. 54, no. 11 (28 June 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Andrew O'Hagan, my italics.



## Part One: Stasis, retrogenesis and retreat

Let us begin by committing ourselves to the truth - to see it like it is, and tell it like it is - to find the truth, to speak the truth, and to live the truth - that's what we will do<sup>8</sup>

Richard Nixon

The first writer to fictionalize 9/11 inventively without recourse to the false haven of what Eric Santner has termed 'narrative fetishism' or the 'construction and deployment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called that narrative into being'<sup>9</sup>, was Jonathan Safran Foer in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, published in 2005; in 2007 it was followed by Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. While all three novelists shared, to varying degrees, a common endeavour to find the 'salving power of narrative' examined in the previous chapter, they did not seek to 'expunge the traces of the trauma' but to suggest imaginary microclimates in which 9/11 occurred but was then either reeled back in, or reworked and reshaped, or in Hamid's case, reinterpreted. Foer and DeLillo in particular envisaged a world in which the attacks took place but which on another imaginary level could be arrested or even sent backwards in time. Foer's mission to freeze time was enabled by his use of the traumatized child narrator, naïve enough to imagine a parallel universe in which his father did not die and the towers did not fall, but precociously wise enough to take his adult audience with him in his tentative steps towards a redemptive comprehension. Similarly, DeLillo uses a child, Justin, to plot a course where imagination could will things to be different. Later in this chapter I will assess the way in which Justin reinvents language to

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Nixon, address accepting the presidential nomination at the Republican National Convention in Miami Beach, Florida, 8 August 1968

<<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25968>> [accessed 26 May 2013].

<sup>9</sup> Eric Santner, 'History beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma', in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'*, ed. by Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 143-154 (p. 144).

construct an altered, less threatening environment in which to live.

Hamid's trajectory is subtly different. He has created a means by which strongly held *ideologies* could be arrested and then reversed, in the form of his character who abandoned his American identity in favour of his hitherto submerged Pakistani roots. Changez sheds his allegiance to Underwood Samson, whose acronym throbs with nationalistic import, and signs up once again to his Pakistani heritage. By accompanying him on this regressive path, the reader's own reservations about the strangeness, the alien quality of his final reactions and motivations are rendered less acute. Changez starts as a known quantity and even though his responses gradually begin to become unfamiliar to a Western audience, the ultimate threat he poses is made no more alarming than that represented by the unnamed and unknown American with whom he shares a restaurant table.

DeLillo's experiment is with re-examined time. *Falling Man* opens and closes at precisely the same moment, as his character Keith emerges bewildered and traumatized from the chaos of the burning Twin Towers. From that moment of beginning to the twinned moment of ending, DeLillo's impulse and imperative is to send time backwards. DeLillo's characters stop, they move sideways and then they continue walking, but backwards this time, not forwards. The local *tai chi* group, who are, after all, expert practitioners of the martial art of slowing down time, freeze their movements entirely. And Keith, estranged from his wife Lianne, feels compelled by the traumatic events to go back to his nuclear family:

He kept on walking. There were the runners who'd stopped and others veering into side streets. Some were walking backwards, looking into the core of it, all those writhing lives back there, and things kept falling, scorched objects trailing lines of fire.

He saw two women sobbing in their reverse march, looking past him, both in running shorts, faces in collapse.

He saw members of the tai chi group from the park nearby, standing with hands extended at roughly chest level, elbows bent, as if all of this, themselves included, might be placed in a state of abeyance.<sup>10</sup>

Lianne, Keith's formerly estranged wife, extends the impulse to send events into reverse. She requests an MRI scan because she is worried about lapses in memory and wonders if this is a sign of impending Alzheimer's, the disease that afflicted her father. Lianne's desire to send events into reverse is to ensure that she heads off a potential assault by her own genetic inheritance. Lianne had always associated her father with the idea of being 'dangerously' alive. But the man who had personified life, the man with energy in abundance, arrested that life and died 'by his own hand'. Death by suicide or death by protracted, dehumanizing Alzheimer's; the end result would have been the same. But by shooting himself, Lianne's father chose the moment and the means; he is as much an emblem of perfect stasis as the falling man himself is. Just as Lianne's father stops time dead, so too does the falling/suspended man. For both of them, 'there is no next',<sup>11</sup> that plaintive cry of finality from Lianne's mother. Lianne's anxiety that she too may have 'no next' drives her to request an MRI scan. To establish the state of her brain function, she is asked to count backwards in sevens:

It made her feel good, the counting down, and she did it sometimes in the day's familiar drift, walking down a street, riding in a taxi. It was her form of lyric verse, subjective and unrhymed, a little songlike but with a rigor, a tradition of fixed order, only backwards, to test the presence of another kind of reversal, which a doctor nicely named retrogenesis.<sup>12</sup>

Retrogenesis, the term coined by psychiatrist Barry Reisburg in 1999, defines the loss of faculties in adulthood in opposite order to their attainment in childhood, particularly in Alzheimer's patients. For Lianne's doctor, the delicately euphemistic term is the means of describing the point at which the

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<sup>10</sup> Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, (London: Picador, 2007), p. 4. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>11</sup> DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 10

<sup>12</sup> DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 188.

brain throws itself into reverse, the moment when it is demonstrably true that there can be 'no next', at least not in any progressive, linear sense. Ultimately the mind regresses to the moment when it is no longer conscious of its own demise. But Lianne's retrogenesis is a different brand of regression from that referred to by the medical profession; hers is a restorative state in which she counts numbers backwards in a form of 'lyric verse' and in which she can uphold a 'tradition of fixed order'. For Lianne, there *is* a 'next'. For DeLillo too, there is a sense in which retrogenesis defines something other than regression, mental atrophy or even nostalgia. His form of retrogenesis seems to represent the exploration of an alternative, salving retreat, in which there can be found 'a next' coupled with the soothing force of the 'fixed order'.

The craving for the 'fixed order' is in part what motivates many of DeLillo's and Foer's characters. In *Falling Man*, the child Justin, Keith and Lianne's son, develops a habit of talking in monosyllables because 'it helps me go slow when I think.' (This resonates with the words of BBC journalist Kevin Marsh, analyzed in the introduction, who described the necessity to move slowly in the newsroom on 9/11: 'You would expect everyone to be rushing about, but everyone was going very slowly. There was almost a feeling that "if I walk too fast I might upset things": a very, very weird atmosphere.'<sup>13</sup>) Oskar's traumatized and mute grandfather in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* loses the power to speak but thereby reverts to an innocent state, that stage in life before the development of human speech brings its own corrupting complications. Oskar himself relies on a part-naïve, part-sophisticated form of communication that is built on bizarre ritual, superstition and word play. Both novels pay silent homage to Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, in which Billy Pilgrim, an American POW who is, as Vonnegut puts it, 'unstuck in time', survives the Dresden bombings, just as Oskar's grandfather has done. Billy cannot change the events of his life, but he is able to travel backwards and forwards in time to relive elements of his experiences. That ability allows him to acquire a fatalistic attitude to his own eventual demise.

Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow*, a book which itself pays tribute to Vonnegut,

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<sup>13</sup> Kevin Marsh interviewed by Charlie Lee-Potter, 8 March 2013.

experiments with retrogenesis in a different way. By reversing the story of a Holocaust doctor, Amis is able to experiment with ideas about the Holocaust's reversal of all humanitarian impulses. While referencing Vonnegut and Amis, both Foer and DeLillo are working on subtly different planes. It is neither Vonnegut's fatalism nor Amis's moralism that they are reaching for in their work. Oskar's grandmother in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* dreams that her own childhood trauma in the bombing raids of Dresden where she lost her entire family, has been driven into backwards motion:

In my dream, all of the collapsed ceilings re-formed above us. The fire went back into the bombs, which rose up and into the bellies of planes whose propellers turned backward, like the second hands of the clocks across Dresden, only faster.<sup>14</sup>

There follows a section interspersed with her dream in which things go backwards, ending with her message to Oskar that one must always tell people one loves them:

It was late, and we were tired.  
 We assumed there would be other nights.  
 Anna's breathing started to slow, but I still wanted to talk.  
 She rolled onto her side.  
 I said, I want to tell you something.  
 She said, You can tell me tomorrow.  
 I had never told her how much I loved her.  
 She was my sister.  
 We slept in the same bed.  
 There was never a right time to say it.  
 It was always unnecessary.  
 The books in my father's shed were sighing.  
 The sheets were rising and falling around me with Anna's breathing.  
 I thought about waking her.  
 But it was unnecessary.

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<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005), pp. 306-307. All subsequent references are to this edition.

There would be other nights.  
 And how can you say I love you to someone you love?  
 I rolled onto my side and fell asleep next to her.  
 Here is the point of everything I have been trying to tell you, Oskar.  
 It's always necessary.  
 I love you,  
 Grandma<sup>15</sup>

So if it is neither stricture nor fatalism that he is reaching for, what is Foer doing by allowing his characters to reverse traumatic events in their lives? By looking at the closing lines of Oskar's grandmother's letter it is possible to inch towards a sense that for Foer, scrolling backwards in time is a redemptive impulse. Is it legitimate, therefore, to accuse him of the 'narrative fetishism' that Eric Santner derides? Santner distinguishes such fetishism from Freud's understanding of *Trauerarbeit*, or mourning, in which *Trauerarbeit* is the process of 'translating, troping, and figuring loss.' 'Narrative fetishism', on the other hand, is:

a strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site and origin of loss elsewhere. Narrative fetishism releases one from the burden of having to reconstitute one's self identity under 'posttraumatic' conditions; in narrative fetishism, the 'post' is indefinitely postponed.<sup>16</sup>

At the very least, Foer could be said to be engaging in some form of therapeutic revisionism. Oskar's grandmother is trying to offer Oskar an answer to 'the point of everything I have been trying to tell you', a response to the conundrums that the traumas of Dresden or the Holocaust or 9/11 raise. Reassessing those traumatic events, by throwing them into reverse and then bringing them back to the present again, appears to be an attempt by Foer to provide his characters with a fortifying *modus vivendi*. But I would argue that the key to this scene is its lack of success. It is a scene of non-communication; Anna continues to sleep as

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<sup>15</sup> Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, p. 314.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Santner, 'History Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma' in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 143-154 (p. 144).

her sister tells her that she loves her. This cannot be regarded as an effective means of overcoming catastrophe or trauma; it is a deliberately failed attempt to overlay a new, less corrosive shape on that catastrophe. Foer's insistence on the methodology's failure removes his narrative from Santner's fetishism and places it in the category of *Trauerarbeit*. In its 'troping and figuring' is its salving retrogenesis, but once again with limitations that the text seems to acknowledge.

The consoling love that Oskar's grandmother's attempts to advocate, with such limited success, is not a love that the nine-year-old boy is able to absorb, even by the end of the novel. The love that nine-year-old Oskar has for his father is so fundamental, redemption may never be possible. He even envisages and voices an imagined trade-off whereby his mother could have been sacrificed instead. And Oskar shares that by now familiar impulse to send time backwards, although not in the complex and restorative way that his grandmother implicitly advocates. In a contentious manoeuvre, Foer took the photograph of one of the two hundred or more people who jumped to their deaths from the twin towers, and literally reversed the order in which the pictures were shot. The man falling to his death is now forever rising to his salvation:

I grabbed the flashlight from my backpack and aimed it at the book. I saw maps and drawings, pictures from magazines and newspapers and the Internet, pictures I'd taken with Grandpa's camera. The whole world was in there. Finally, I found the pictures of the falling body.

Was it Dad?

Maybe.

Whoever it was, it was somebody.

I ripped the pages out of the book.

I reversed the order, so the last one was first, and the first was last.

When I flipped through them, it looked like the man was floating up through the sky.

And if I'd had more pictures, he would've flown through a window, back into the building, and the smoke would've poured into the hole that the plane was about to come out of.

Dad would've left his messages backward, until the machine was empty, and the plane would've flown backward away from him, all the way to Boston. [...] He would have told me the story of the Sixth Borough, from the voice in the can at the end to the beginning, from 'I love you' to 'Once upon a time ...'

We would have been safe.<sup>17</sup>

So the urgency of the present tense offered by his grandmother ('Here is the point of everything I have been trying to tell you, Oskar. It's always necessary. I love you, Grandma'<sup>18</sup>) is replaced by the regretful longing of Oskar's counterfactual conditional tense: 'We would have been safe.'

Oskar is trying to imagine a world in which the catastrophe did not occur: his grandmother is able to imagine a world in which trauma can be transmuted by the power of human connection. That impulse not just to love, but to *express* love is common to *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, *Falling Man* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. However, in Changez' case in the latter novel, his hopeless love for Erica, and his eventual rejection by her, is neither redemptive, nor even retrogenetic; it is, after all, not even legitimate or 'real'. It is only by impersonating Erica's dead lover that he is able to make love to her at all. Changez attempts retrogenesis, but in disguise. His devotion to Erica has an added political dimension. It develops and recedes, along with his devotion to America and then his break with it. But as Hamid makes explicit on his website, 'in the Muslim world, one sees love for things American co-exist with anger towards America. Which is stronger, politics or love, is like asking which is stronger exhaling or inhaling. They are two sides of the same thing.'<sup>19</sup> This duality of perspective is what sets this novel apart from the other two in that it alone envisages some sort of political accommodation, in which two opposing halves need not be in opposition but can co-exist. It should be said however that the novel makes no claims that such a *modus vivendi* could pertain within America itself, but merely amongst those for whom a rage against the United

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<sup>17</sup> Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, p. 326.

<sup>18</sup> Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, p. 314.

<sup>19</sup> Mohsin Hamid interviewed by Hamish Hamilton for Hamid's official website, February 2007 <<http://www.mohsinhamid.com/interviewhh2007.html>> [accessed 22 May 2013].



States coexists with a love for it. For all three novelists, *Trauerarbeit* is a stumbling, faltering and imperfect process.

## Part Two: *Falling Man, Tumbling Woman*: visual image as taboo

... to compare poetry with painting is to make a metaphor, while to differentiate poetry from painting is to state a literal truth<sup>20</sup>

W. J. T. Mitchell

The image of a falling man, reversed in Foer's novel, is the eponymous focal point of DeLillo's attempt to fictionalize 9/11. DeLillo chose a different, infinitely more notorious photograph, although he did not stray into the dangerous territory of manipulating the image or the series of images in order to represent a nine-year-old boy's melancholic cry that 'we would have been safe'. The infamous photography captured by Richard Drew for Associated Press and described so memorably by DeLillo (fig. 1) was too controversial to use as a book cover for a novel by an American author. There is a resistance in the United States to using that photograph again, a self-imposed restriction that does not apply to the same degree elsewhere in the world, but which underlines the fundamental difficulties that the visual arts have in addressing the trauma of 9/11. In any case, the cost for the use of that photograph as a cover would have been in excess of £1,000, making it a practical barrier as well as an emotional one.<sup>21</sup> But DeLillo did not need the photograph; he had no difficulty in conjuring up the memory of it in a few lines of charged prose:

The mass of the towers filled the frame of the picture. The man falling, the towers contiguous, she thought, behind him. The enormous soaring lines, the vertical column stripes. The man with blood on his shirt, she thought, or burn marks ... this picture burned a hole in her mind and

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<sup>20</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 49.

<sup>21</sup> Figure quoted to CLP by former Picture Editor of Telegraph Newspapers, Stuart Nicol, October 2007.

heart, dear God, he was a falling angel and his beauty was horrific.<sup>22</sup>



Fig. 1.

The first edition of DeLillo's novel had on its cover an image that paid homage to Richard Drew (fig. 2); on its left hand side the picture appeared to show a

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<sup>22</sup> DeLillo, *Falling Man*, pp. 221-222.

building similarly bisected and scored by lines and window frames, while the right hand side which dragged the eye downwards in a rushing motion of light and speed, appeared to mimic the downward path of someone or something falling. But turn the cover through ninety degrees and the image is no longer the twinned image of a vertiginous skyscraper and something careering downwards; it is a perfectly anodyne, slightly dumpy industrial unit set back from a railway track and a moving suburban train.

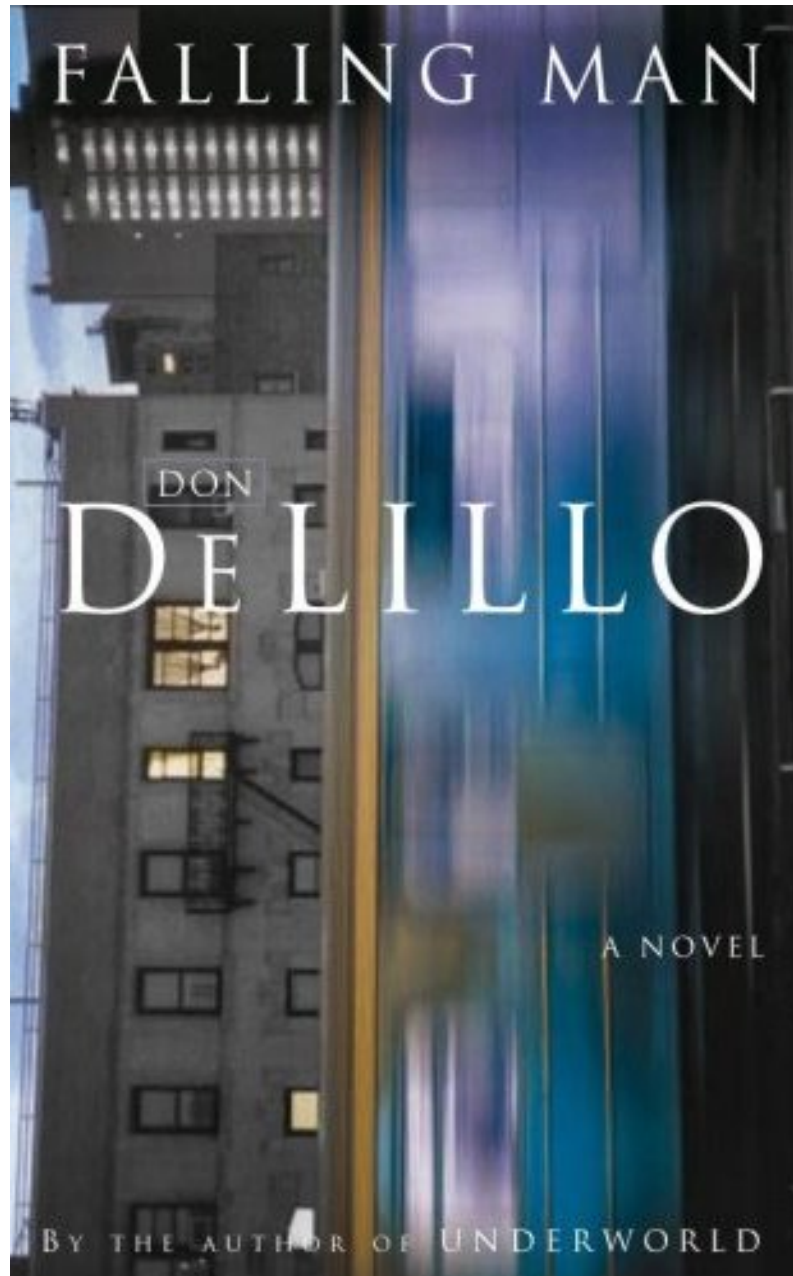


Fig. 2

The cover spoke eloquently of the shift in perspective and interpretation that a different viewpoint can bring. But it is possible that even this image was too redolent of Richard Drew's falling man because the paperback edition that

appeared the following year was of a far less dynamic photograph of plump and very solid-looking clouds, seen from above. No one could fall from the sky through clouds as woolly and substantial as these. Could it be that the art directors were trying a little restorative revisionism of their own, the kind that seeks comfort in the use of the counterfactual conditional? But in any event, whatever the choice of image, DeLillo's clear prose conjures up Drew's image perfectly.

If the photograph was too problematic to be used, undoctored, by DeLillo, it was certainly too contentious for Foer to use and manipulate. To take that loaded sequence of images and then to play a visual trick by reversing the order would have caused outrage, even supposing that Associated Press would have taken the highly unlikely step of granting permission for the series of photographs to be manipulated and reversed as Foer needed.

It should be noted of course that Richard Drew's image encapsulates everything that is misleading about so-called 'factual' reporting. In an investigation by *Esquire* of who the falling man might be, it became apparent that Richard Drew had chosen one frame from a sequence of eleven. 'Photographs lie' said *Esquire*. 'Especially great photographs':

The Falling Man in Richard Drew's picture fell in the manner suggested by the photograph for only a fraction of a second, and then kept falling. The photograph functioned as a study of doomed verticality, a fantasia of straight lines, with a human being slivered at the center, like a spike. In truth, however, the Falling Man fell with neither the precision of an arrow nor the grace of an Olympic diver. He fell like everyone else, like all the other jumpers -- trying to hold on to the life he was leaving, which is to say that he fell desperately, inelegantly. In Drew's famous photograph, his humanity is in accord with the lines of the buildings. In the rest of the sequence -- the eleven outtakes -- his humanity stands apart. He is not augmented by aesthetics; he is merely human, and his humanity, startled

and in some cases horizontal, obliterates everything else in the frame.<sup>23</sup>

It has been calculated that those who jumped took only ten seconds to reach the ground, eventually travelling at 150 miles an hour. Most jumped from the 101<sup>st</sup> to 105<sup>th</sup> floors of the North Tower. There was a great deal of agonized speculation online about the 'jumpers' as they are euphemistically known; should they be judged as having committed suicide? James Martin, a Catholic priest, attempted a religiously driven mission to remove the supposedly sinful term 'suicide' from the actions of those who jumped. In an interview broadcast on National Public Radio he insisted that 'There's no way that that can be considered suicide. And I paused for a minute trying to figure out a way of expressing that. And this friend of mine... just said, "No they were trying to save their lives". And I remember thinking that was a beautiful response ...'<sup>24</sup> It was a position that was widely endorsed, both by relatives and officials. Ellen Borakove, spokesperson for New York's medical examiner's office, was quoted widely as stating that a jumper 'is somebody who goes to the office in the morning knowing that they will commit suicide'. She went on to state that 'These people were forced out by the smoke and flames or blown out.'<sup>25</sup> Deaths were listed as 'homicide'.

Richard Drew's deceptive image of the falling man was precisely what James Martin and his cohorts were looking for. The apparent athletic grace and ferocity of purpose displayed by the man soaring to earth like Superman, answered their prayers, as well as the anxieties of those seeking redemptive explanations. The image declaimed that this was a divine mission; he was not tumbling chaotically to earth in a hideous trade-off between fire and damnation and neither had he chosen to do it.

In contrast, the sculptor Eric Fischl discovered that there was no stomach for an image that did not accord with the aesthetic principles of Drew's falling man.

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<sup>23</sup> Tom Junod, 'The Falling Man', *Esquire*, 8 September 2009, [http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP\\_FALLINGMAN](http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP_FALLINGMAN) [accessed 24 March, 2013].

<sup>24</sup> Father James Martin interviewed on 'Fresh Air', National Public Radio, 12 August 2002.

<sup>25</sup> Dennis Cauchon and Martha Moore, 'Desperation forced a horrific decision', *USA Today*, 2 September 2002.

The renowned sculptor produced a piece of work called *Tumbling Woman* that was placed outside the Rockefeller Center in New York (fig. 3). The naked, frightful figure, her plump, ungainly limbs twisted and chaotic, her head and neck at that moment taking the full shocking weight of her fall, provoked outrage. Where was her divine mission? She appeared to be about to meet her death messily, with nothing to dignify her or to give her meaning. *Tumbling Woman's* reign lasted for only one week before she was first draped in a cloth, then surrounded by a curtain and finally removed altogether. Those affronted by her presence may well have approved of the quasi-paramedical treatment she received on her way to the morgue. But in an interview with the New York Times art critic David Rakoff, Eric Fischl expressed his shame that he capitulated to the demands for her removal so swiftly:

I think this is a new turn, for the worse. Right now we're shrinking away from truth. No one can criticize the president because we're in a very vulnerable time, even though he's doing some things that are terrifying. You can't express your personal horror and trauma at something that we all experienced. I think that what happened is that since the 60's there's been an ambition that art merge itself with pop culture. At first it was an ironic stance, and then it became actually a real thing; people wanted to have art as a playground and as entertainment. And that's fine in good times, but when something terrible or powerful or meaningful happens, you want an art that speaks to that, that embraces the language that would carry us forwards, bring us together, all of that stuff. I think that September 11 showed us that as an art world we weren't quite qualified to deal with this. Not trained enough to handle it.<sup>26</sup>

A bystander quoted by CBS News raised a fundamental question about the role of art in troubled times. "I don't think it dignifies their deaths," said Paul Labb, who was strolling through the concourse while the statue was still visible. "It's

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<sup>26</sup> David Rakoff, 'Post-9/11 Modernism', *New York Times Magazine*, 27 October 2002 <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/27/magazine/27QUESTIONS.html> [accessed 25 March 2013].



not art. ... It is very disrupting when you see it."<sup>27</sup> So, it is not art because it does not dignify and it is not art because it is disruptive. And in any event, according to Eric Fischl, visual artists were not 'trained enough to handle it'. The idea that art should dignify and that art should not disrupt seems to run counter to twentieth-century notions of art and its presentation of, indeed obsession with, the real. But it would appear that 9/11 has done something to exceptionalist sensibilities and sensitivities and made it newly necessary to produce art that is both reassuring and salving and therefore by extension misleading. It is possible that this requirement for dignity and reassurance is what causes the friction and tension in Foer's text. Oskar's grandmother's claim to have found a redemptive connection with her past does not sit comfortably and it does not convince.



Fig. 3

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<sup>27</sup> 'Sept. 11 Sculpture Covered Up', CBS News, 11 February 2009, <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/09/19/national/main522528.shtml>> [accessed 25 March 2013].

It appears that the lack of tolerance for the 'real' in artistic expressions of 9/11 is particular to this trauma, perhaps in part because the attacks are recent. In 2012, the German drug manufacturer Chemie Grunenthal apologized for the first time to Thalidomide survivors, a full fifty years after the damage was done. The apology was derided as insulting by survivors and their fury was in large part directed at the sculpture Grunenthal unveiled to mark their apparent regret. The impressionistic work showed a small child, sitting meekly on a chair, with vague, ill-defined damage to her arms. Survivors complained not that it was lacking in dignity but that it failed utterly to represent the true scale of the damage. 'We're all in our fifties now. We're adults who've had to endure terrible suffering and humiliations. The sculpture is of a little girl. It's saccharine and it's insulting. It infantilizes us.'<sup>28</sup> Thalidomiders were asking for more realism, more confrontation with the real, not less.

It is fascinating to observe that Eric Fischl tried again. Having expressed regret that he acquiesced to the demand that *Tumbling Woman* should be removed, he made another attempt to enshrine his right to give artistic expression to 9/11. On 1 November 2008 he reintroduced *Tumbling Woman* to the public in a solo exhibition at the Mary Boone Gallery on New York's West 24 Street. It has not been established whether it was greeted with more acceptance by those who decried it on the public streets and for whom dignity appeared to be so essential. But it is important to note that Fischl subtly reinterpreted *Tumbling Woman* for this exhibition. This time *Tumbling Woman* lay forlornly on a plinth, in a giant, vaulted, cathedral-like space (fig. 4). Crucially, the gallery said that this was a 'variation' on Fischl's original bronze sculpture. *Tumbling Woman* was given 'new context in the presence of another solitary figure – the striking translucent "Ten Breaths: Falling Angel" mounted high above the floor of the Gallery.'<sup>29</sup> Could it be that the presence of an angel brought something of the 'divine mission' that Richard Drew's Falling Man represented, thereby allowing the public to find a reassuring and bolstering religiosity in their art and to accept *Tumbling Woman* in the way that they refused to do before?

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with British Thalidomide survivor by Charlie Lee-Potter, 7 February 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Notes from the Mary Boone Gallery, New York,  
<http://www.maryboonegallery.com/exhibitions/2008-2009/Eric-Fischl/Eric-Fischl-2008.pdf>  
 [accessed 25 March 2013]





Fig. 4

Eric Fischl certainly believed that removing *Tumbling Woman* from a public space and housing her in a private gallery, went some way towards making her acceptable. In an interview with me he stated: ‘One thing I heard more than once was that it would have been okay if it had been shown in a gallery or museum. I guess they meant that art needs a context of art to make it understandable or maybe just to make it safe? I was feeling that 9/11 was a public event and a shared event. I did not want my response to be limited to an art audience. It was important for me to get the work out into a public arena’.<sup>30</sup> It appears that the public did not simply want a ‘context’; they wanted a quasi-Christian aesthetic that the gallery’s cathedral-like space provided. It is also possible that they wanted to remove her from the very ‘public arena’ that Fischl desired. They wanted her indoors, away from the city’s streets that had

<sup>30</sup> Erich Fischl interviewed by Charlie Lee-Potter, 25 November 2008.

resonated with the sounds of those who really did fall that day. (Incidentally, the fury felt by Thalidomiders at Grunenthal's sculpture may have been exacerbated by the fact that the statue was not only made on Grunenthal's terms, it was on their territory; their headquarters in Stolberg.)

Eric Fischl blamed a great deal of the public's fury at his sculpture on 'journalists who wrote absurd stuff about my intentions. Their words fanned the panic/pain of the public. It was a mob mentality. They were looking for an easy target. It was ridiculous but unstoppable. There was no reasoning. It was truly hysterical.'<sup>31</sup> In addition to this public hysteria, Eric Fischl also identified a fundamental difficulty in attempting to interpret the event of 9/11 artistically:

The problem with trying to confront and ultimately remember or memorialize 9/11 is that there were all these people dead and no bodies. The people simply disappeared. The only media coverage in the States that had images of people were the jumpers and that was immediately censored. The mourning turned to the loss of architecture as a way of expressing the depth of our grief. Everything focused on the Twin Towers as a symbol of our great loss. When I introduced a figure into our memorializing event it was seen as an act of selfishness, careerism and cruelty. The public was not ready to openly share and mourn the losses of human beings. I would love to see *Tumbling Woman* find its way back into the public arena. My dream would be to have it placed at the site, but I will not hold my breath on that one.'<sup>32</sup>

Fischl's view that the disappearance of the dead made his introduction of a human form somehow shocking and offensive is consistent with the ideas expressed by David Simpson that Ground Zero took on the status of 'sacred ground':

Human relics, even the tiniest fragments of human bodies, were painstakingly excavated from the enormous piles of rubble, carefully documented, and put through DNA testing in hopes of being able to send

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

something, however small, to the families of the dead for conventional burial. [...] It was not so. Little remained, so that bodies and body parts became absolutely precious and were accorded unprecedented levels of respect and attention.<sup>33</sup>

Fischl was right to be pessimistic about the possibilities of his sculpture being allowed to rest at Ground Zero. When I asked him again in March 2013 if the public's revulsion had receded in any way, he said that 'nothing has changed with regards to *Tumbling Woman's* public presence, though it has entered the lexicon through many articles and theses about censorship, art and 9/11. So it has some currency.'<sup>34</sup> It was not the outcome he hoped for and adds weight to the suggestion that the visual arts, and to a large degree journalism too, have been circumscribed by a return to a confining moralizing in the public sphere, and to the aesthetics of tabloid outrage. But fiction has not been constrained in the same way. It appears that a novelistic approach to the post-9/11 landscape is somehow permitted to be more explicit than other mediums, even though it too is set against the background of some of the same criticisms. Could an evasion of the real be the reason why novelists seem less censored by the queasiness of their readers, as well as less hampered by anxieties about dealing with the very recent past? Foer and DeLillo certainly deploy children as the lightning rods around whom 9/11 traumas are explored, while at the same time using them to avoid the real. DeLillo's child figure, Justin, imagines Bin Laden as Bill Lawton; Foer's Oskar appears ludicrously as Yorick in his school production of *Hamlet*, having naively engineered an audience made up of people named Black, strangers he has sought out in the previous twelve weeks to attempt to explain the circumstances of his father's death:

Abe was there. Ada and Agnes were there. (They were actually sitting next to each other, although they didn't realize it.) I saw Albert and Alice and Allen and Arnold and Barbara and Barry. [...] But what was weird was that they didn't know what they had in common ...<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 28.

<sup>34</sup> Eric Fischl interviewed by Charlie Lee-Potter, March 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, p. 143.

There is complexity here, however. As Jay Rosen pointed out in his response to 9/11, while his four-year old daughter held the towers as ‘playful objects’<sup>36</sup> in her imagination because they were twins, nevertheless their loss produced a concomitant loss in her. ‘September 11 was the day I lost my daughter to the news [...] By the time I got home, she had absorbed from television news images of destruction beyond what I had seen in my entire life.’<sup>37</sup> That combination of acuity and playfulness certainly pertains to the nine-year-old boys who appear to have key status as dispensers of wisdom for both Foer and DeLillo. DeLillo has admitted that his novel *The Names*, which ends with an excerpt from a ‘novel in progress’ by a nine-year-old boy, was in fact written by Atticus Lish, the son of his editor and friend Gordon Lish. DeLillo said that rather than ‘totally invent a piece of writing that a 9-year old boy might do, I looked at some of the work that Atticus had done when he was 9. And I used it. I used half a dozen sentences from Atticus’s work. More important, the simple exuberance of his work helped me to do the last pages of the novel. In other words, I stole from a kid.’<sup>38</sup> In an interview that Don DeLillo gave in 1988 and in which he was questioned about his fascination with children, he clarified his view:

I think we feel, perhaps superstitiously, that children have a direct route to, have direct contact to the kind of natural truth that eludes us as adults. In *The Names* the father is transported by what he sees as a kind of deeper truth underlying the language his son uses in writing his stories. He sees misspellings and misused words as reflecting a kind of reality that he as an adult couldn’t possibly grasp. And I think he relates this to the practice of speaking in tongues, which itself is what we might call an alternate reality. It’s a fabricated language which seems to have a certain pattern to it. It isn’t just gibberish. It isn’t language, but it isn’t

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<sup>36</sup> Jay Rosen, ‘September 11 in the mind of American journalism’, *Journalism After September 11*, ed. by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 27.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>38</sup> Robert R. Harris, ‘A Talk with Don DeLillo’, *New York Times Books*, 10 October 1982,

<<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/03/16/lifetimes/del-v-talk1982.html>> [accessed 25 March 2013].

gibberish either. And I think this is the way we feel about children in general. There is something they know but can't tell us. Or there is something they remember which we've forgotten.<sup>39</sup>

It is not convincing that children should simply be the means by which we find a direct route to 'natural truth'. The impulse to include the insights of children appears to me to have more to do with the fumbling imperative to make redemptive connections, the redemptive connections incidentally that Fischl was coruscated for not providing. Just as DeLillo talked about a child's ability to find an 'alternate reality', it is the child in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* who finds such an alternative. Early on, Oskar assumes that the endless connections he can make, just by joining up dots on his map of Manhattan, suggest they must be meaningless:

The dots from where I'd found things looked like the stars in the universe. I connected them, like an astrologer, and if you squinted your eyes like a Chinese person, it kind of looked like the word 'fragile'. Fragile. What was fragile? Was Central Park fragile? Was nature fragile? Were the things I found fragile? A thumbtack isn't fragile. Is a bent spoon fragile? I erased, and connected the dots in a different way, to make 'door.' Fragile? Door? Then I thought of porte, which is French for door, obviously. I erased and connected the dots to make 'porte'. I had the revelation that I could connect the dots to make 'cyborg,' and 'platypus,' and 'boobs,' and even 'Oskar,' if you were extremely Chinese. I could connect them to make almost anything I wanted, which meant I wasn't getting close to anything.<sup>40</sup>

But finally he gets not just close, but to the heart of things. Just as Don DeLillo's child talks gibberish but makes perfect sense, so Foer's child joins the random dots and makes a version of the truth out of them.

In a review, the novelist Walter Kirn complained that Foer's eccentric writing

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<sup>39</sup> *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, ed. by Thomas DePietro, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2005). p. 72.

<sup>40</sup> Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, p. 10.

and characterization is done in a 'nifty, Rubik's cube sort of way that gives a chilly intellectual thrill but doesn't penetrate the bosom.'<sup>41</sup> He also described Foer's whimsical writing technique as 'no more controversial than pre-ripped bluejeans.'<sup>42</sup> Such criticism has a certain sneery wit, but is Walter Kirn right to say that Foer's writing has a brassy but vapid quality, a quality that is all the more offensive for dealing with such an emotive subject? Admittedly, there is sentimentality present in Foer's work, as well as a typographical playfulness, entirely absent in the novels by DeLillo and Hamid. But there is intellectual rigour and an epic ambition that take this novel far beyond the sentimentality displayed by the New York Times' *Portraits of Grief*, the male-centric nationalism of films such as *Flight 93*, the bleak excursions in comic farce of novels such as Ken Kalfus' *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* or even the quasi-religious reverence imbued by the final resting place of Eric Fischl's *Tumbling Woman*.

*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* explores the inadequacy of language, the gaps between words and the constant struggle to say precisely what is meant. The grandfather who expresses yes with one hand and no with the other; Fo Black, who wears an 'I Love New York' t-shirt, assuming that NY means 'you' as *ny* does in Chinese; Ruth Black who believes that her husband communicated with her by shining a torch into the sky to let her know that he was there; Oskar reading 'Don't go away' on his grandmother's window and assuming that it is meant for him even though we learn 150 pages later that it was a message to his unknown grandfather; Oskar's grandmother's long and detailed description of her attempt to stop her husband leaving her compared to the earlier description of the same encounter by Oskar's grandfather which amounts to little more than blank pages; Oskar's father calling his mother on her mobile to say that he had escaped from the burning building, all the while knowing that she knew that he was lying to make her feel better. And finally, most poignantly of all, the final message that Oskar's father left on the answer machine at home, assuming, since no one picked up, that the apartment must be empty. Since

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<sup>41</sup> Walter Kirn, 'Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close: Everything is Included', *New York Times*, April 3 2005 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/03/books/review/0403cover-kirn.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>> [accessed 25 March 2013].

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

that day Oskar has told no one that he had been there, listening, but unable to pick up the phone. But when Oskar finally meets the man to whom the mysterious key from his father's blue vase belongs, he tells him the burdensome story:

'There are fifteen seconds between the third and the fourth, which is the longest space. You can hear people in the background screaming and crying. And you can hear glass breaking, which is part of what makes me wonder if people were jumping.'

*Are you there? Are you there? Are you there? Are you there? Are you there?*

*Are you there? Are you there? Are you there? Are you there? Are you there?*

*Are you*

'And then it cut off.

I've timed the message, and it's one minute and twenty-seven seconds. Which means it ended at 10:24. Which was when the building came down. So maybe that's how he died.'<sup>43</sup>

But maybe it is not. This, in the end, is the way in which fiction can wrestle with the conundrums of 9/11. And this is why Oskar's use of the counterfactual conditional sits perfectly harmoniously with his grandmother's present tense. It is, after all, DeLillo's sense of 'alternate reality' and 'natural truth' that is the novelist's *lingua franca*. It is more in the end than the redemptive power of telling a story that I explored in the last chapter. It is a means of conjuring a pattern out of an assortment of random dots, of finding a means of communicating between people who do not share the same language, of accepting that even though verisimilitude is sometimes difficult to achieve, understanding is not. Fiction is unembarrassed by perspectivism, as I will now suggest.

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<sup>43</sup> Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, pp. 301-302.

### Part Three: The grandiose grows tiresome...

Paul Cézanne

I don't think there's anything more surreal, or  
more abstract than reality

Giorgio Morandi

DeLillo's performance artist, the eponymous 'falling man', attempts to capture and freeze the moment after victims trapped in the World Trade Center jumped but before they reached the ground. It is, in other words, a few seconds before Fischl made his attempt to represent it. DeLillo is precise in his description of the technical details. His falling man does not jump on an elasticized rope as a bungee jumper would; bungee jumping is, of course, the epitome of 'safe' and controlled danger. He does not rebound comically from his initial jump as though on a spring, or trampoline. He stops, dead, when he reaches the end of his rope:

He worked without pulleys, cables or wires. Safety harness only. And no bungee cord to absorb the shock of longer falls. Just an arrangement of straps under the dress shirt and blue suits with one strand emerging from a trouser leg and extending back to a secure structure at the top of the fall.<sup>44</sup>

Later DeLillo makes clear that 'His falls were said to be painful and highly dangerous due to the rudimentary equipment he used.'<sup>45</sup> When the falling man's body is found, it is noted that he 'suffered from chronic depression due to a spinal condition.' So damaged had his back become by his insistence on falling like a dead weight, without anything to absorb the shock that he had at times been taken to hospital. He is not the 'dangling man' of Saul Bellow's

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<sup>44</sup> DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 220.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.



creation, waiting idly for the draft that may invigorate him.<sup>46</sup> Bellow's Joseph, as a variant of Robert Park's 'marginal man', is lethargic and acquiescent. By contrast, the falling man is engagé and, in a perverse way, represents a secular hierophant for all those traumatized by 9/11. He is both signifier and signified, in that he represents all those who jumped, while literally being a man who has jumped. To that extent he becomes the hero of a peculiar kind of *Schicksalstragödie*. He has not fallen, so cannot be The Fallen Man; neither is he falling so is not therefore The Falling Man. His identity could be represented, perhaps, as The Fall Guy/Man who has juddered to a shocking and painful halt, the stark symbol of this, and other, 9/11 novels' attempts to stop time dead. His is not the elasticated pull-back of the bungee rope, but the instantaneous dead stop of the heavy weight at the end of a thick rope. Layered within his meaning, of course, is the totem of the hanged/dead man, whose neck is broken the instant that his fall is halted.

Mohsin Hamid's approach to arresting time is subtly different to the techniques used by DeLillo and Foer. Hamid moves his protagonist to the other side of the world, back to his native Pakistan, from where he literally and figuratively changes his perspective. Just prior to Changez' return to Asia, he watches the attacks on television. Hamid ensures that Changez at first views the attack on the Twin Towers as a fictional one and immediately afterwards, as something pleasing. It is a response that would have been unthinkable to him when he was first enjoying the successes and financial rewards of his job at Underwood Samson; his dramatic volte-face has been brought about to allow him, and therefore us, to view the scene from a radically different perspective which is, in itself, a form of temporal shift:

The following evening was supposed to be our last in Manila. I was in my room, packing my things. I turned on the television and saw what at first I took to be a film. But as I continued to watch, I realized that it was not fiction but news. I stared as one – and then the other – of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center collapsed. And then I *smiled*. Yes,

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<sup>46</sup> Saul Bellow, *Dangling Man* (1944; London: Penguin, 2007).

despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased.<sup>47</sup>

It may sound despicable, but it also sounds plausible, given that we have been encouraged, enticed even, to shift our perspective with him. Later, when Changez is back in Lahore and orchestrating increasingly threatening and militaristic assaults on his former US home, Hamid devises another incremental adjustment in perspective for his character. Changez has progressed from finding the attack pleasing to making a decision to abandon his ‘Americanness’ altogether. The employee of United Samson has evolved to the point where he neatly reverses his employer’s name, so that it no longer resonates acronymically with the name of the nation itself, or indeed with Uncle Sam; he pits Samson against United [States]:

There are adjustments one must make if one comes here from America; a different way of *observing* is required. I recall the Americanness of my own gaze when I returned to Lahore that winter when war was in the offing. I was struck at first by how shabby our house appeared, with cracks running through its ceilings and dry bubbles of paint flaking off where dampness had entered its walls. ... But as I reacclimatized and my surroundings once again became familiar, it occurred to me that the house had not changed in my absence. I had changed; I was looking about me with the eyes of a foreigner, and not just any foreigner, but that particular type of entitled and unsympathetic American who so annoyed me when I encountered him in the classrooms and workplaces of your country’s elite. This realization angered me; staring at my reflection in the speckled glass of my bathroom mirror I resolved to exorcize the unwelcome sensibility by which I had become possessed.<sup>48</sup>

This ‘different way of observing’ has the equivalent effect of stopping or rewriting time. The assault of 9/11 is no longer a fundamental assault on global stability. It is something to be viewed from the other side of a two-way mirror.

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<sup>47</sup> Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2007), p 72. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>48</sup> Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, p. 124.

Changez is assisted in his attempt to 'exorcize the unwelcome sensibility' by Mohsin Hamid's choice of linguistic style which he has himself described as '... courtly and menacing, a vaguely anachronistic voice rooted in the Anglo-Indian heritage of elite Pakistani schools and suggestive of an older system of values and of an abiding historical pride. And I decided on a frame that allowed two points of view, two perspectives, to exist with only one narrator, thereby creating a double mirror for the mutual societal suspicion with which Pakistan views America and America views Pakistan.'<sup>49</sup>

Perspectivism, the possibility of two different points of view, is something that is scrubbed from most journalists' lexicons very early in their training. 'On the one hand and on the other hand' is a journalistic by-phrase for 'boring'. To equivocate as a journalist is rarely encouraged. Novice BBC news trainees for example are warned not to use the concluding phrase in a report that 'only time will tell'<sup>50</sup>. Quite apart from being a cliché, it is, after all, the ultimate in equivocation, because no position has been taken, no judgement asserted. But perspectivism in the hands of a fiction writer can produce what Hamid describes as the novelist's 'core skill', empathy:

I believe that the world is suffering from a deficit of empathy at the moment: the political positions of both Osama Bin Laden and George W. Bush are founded on failures of empathy, failures of compassion towards people who seem different. By taking readers inside a man who both loves and is angered by America, and hopefully by allowing readers to feel what that man feels, I hope to show that the world is more complicated than politicians and newspapers usually have time for. We need to stop being so confused by the fear we are fed: a shared humanity unites us with people we are encouraged to think of as our enemies.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Mohsin Hamid's official website: 'Hamish Hamilton interview with Mohsin Hamid (February 2007)',

<<http://www.mohsinhamid.com/interviewhh2007.html>>

[accessed 9 February 2013].

<sup>50</sup> This was one of the key tenets of my early instruction as a BBC trainee.

<sup>51</sup> Mohsin Hamid interviewed by Harcourt for Hamid's official website, March 2007

<<http://www.mohsinhamid.com/interviewharcourt2007.html>> [accessed 22 May 2013].

It is possible that Hamid realized that any hint of religious fundamentalism in his character would make the task of establishing empathy and perspectivism infinitely more difficult. We only have to look at reasonable, intelligent, empathetic Lianne in *Falling Man* to see the effect that the mere suggestion of Islam could have in these charged times. Lianne is driven to physically assault one of her neighbours for repeatedly playing music that sounded as though it might come from 'Turkey or Egypt or Kurdistan'.<sup>52</sup>

Hamid's attempt to expunge any fundamentalist religious context to his character's motivations is subtle almost to the point of invisibility, but it is there nevertheless. The name Changez is of course the French imperative form, ordering 'change', although this is not the principal meaning intended by Hamid, who stresses that Changez is the Urdu name for the aggressor Genghis who launched an attack on the Muslim world. Hamid's publishers in France were unhappy with his choice of name, regarding its meaning in French to be too explicit, too obvious. Their solution, to which he agreed, was to spell it phonetically as 'Tchenguiz', which had the additional merit of restoring the original association with Genghis.<sup>53</sup> Changez follows Islam but is not a fundamentalist, and yet in a subtle piece of religious perspectivism, Hamid introduces Judeo-Christian tropes of the Fall of Man and of John the Baptist. Juan-Bautista, the head of the publishing company in Chile who helps shift Changez from the corporate course he has elected to take, has echoes of John the Baptist in him, as Hamid has conceded. Jean-Baptiste/John the Baptist offers Changez a form of redemption.<sup>54</sup> Jean-Baptiste also holds within his name echoes of Jean-Baptiste Clamence, the narrator in Camus' *The Fall*, a 'novelistic tip of the hat', Hamid has admitted, to Camus' dramatic monologue form that he emulated. It is of course a nod to the Fall of Man too, further evidence of the religious perspectivism in the text.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 120.

<sup>53</sup> Mohsin Hamid interviewed on BBC Radio 4's Book Club, 4 September 2011 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0144ybj>> [accessed 25 March 2013].

<sup>54</sup> Guardian Book Club: 'The Reluctant Fundamentalist by Mohsin Hamid', 21 May 2011.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

In addition to religious pluralism, Hamid appears to be seeking out intellectual and racial tolerance, although as he has admitted, the difficulties he encountered every time he tried to travel to either the United Kingdom or the USA on his Pakistani passport reminded him that tolerance is no more than a work in progress. And it is fascinating to note that in a casually racist manner his readers always assume that he is himself the book's Pakistani protagonist, much to his frustration: 'I wonder why they never ask if I am his American listener. After all, a novel can often be a divided man's conversation with himself.'<sup>56</sup>

It is no wonder then that this is a novel that questions the reader closely. It is a work of fiction that does more than reaffirm the reader's views. According to Hamid it 'implicates the audience; it holds up a mirror to what they are. In that process, the author establishes a conversation with the audience.' In asserting its dualism, the magnetic pull of both East and West, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* attempts the opposite of a news report. It is purposely ambivalent, deliberately misleading and relentlessly lacking in definitive answers. The inevitable consequence of the novel's refusal to be conclusive is that time is halted, albeit in a different way to that imagined by DeLillo and Foer. The reader progresses through *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* with a sense of insistent, low-level dread, with an expectation that a 'terrible thing is going to happen' and yet it never does because time is arrested. The fact that something is *going* to happen sets it apart from *Falling Man* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* where the 'terrible thing' has already happened and is being coped with. As Lianne's mother Nina puts it when asked what will happen next: 'Nothing is next. There is no next. This was next. Eight years ago they planted a bomb in one of the towers. Nobody said what's next. This was next. The time to be afraid is when there's no reason to be afraid. Too late now.'<sup>57</sup> The landscape of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a deliberately shifting one. The protagonist is a self-confessed unreliable witness and his American companion may be a benign tourist or a murderous CIA operative, but that is the whole point. It has always been the novel's virtue not its vice that it can mean many things

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<sup>56</sup> Mohsin Hamid's official website.

<sup>57</sup> DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p. 10.

concurrently, unconstrained as it is by factual reporting's claim to tell *the* truth.

DeLillo makes important use of this plurality of truths and the miasma of rumour and misinformation, to accentuate the impossibility of ever establishing the facts entirely. The wild imaginings of Lianne's son Justin and his friends are in many ways similar to the thousands of websites that continue to peddle 9/11 conspiracy theories of the wildest kinds. Justin transmutes the name bin Laden into an innocuous sounding character called Bill Lawton:

'Maybe he heard the name once, or misheard it, then imposed this version on future occasions. In other words he never adjusted his original sense of what he was hearing.'

'What was he hearing?'

'He was hearing Bill Lawton. They were saying bin Laden.'

Lianne considered this. It seemed to her, at first, that some important meaning might be located in the soundings of the boy's small error. She looked at Keith, searching for its concurrence, for something she might use to secure her free-floating awe. He chewed his food and shrugged.

'So, together,' he said, 'they developed the myth of Bill Lawton.'<sup>58</sup>

On the one hand, the 'myth of Bill Lawton' is emblematic of all the rumours, lies, shards of misinformation and speculative gossip that continue to litter newspapers and the Internet. But myth-making is also fiction's recourse to alternative or multiple truths. The novel can be 'a divided man's conversation with himself' as described by Mohsin Hamid, but it can also be a divided reader's confrontation with various possibilities. If the novel can juggle different versions of the truth successfully, it follows that it must hold within it many versions of memory, with each strand in the plait being both different and yet non-oppositional. Robert Eaglestone has explored the idea that memory is not a photographic resource from which sepia-toned pictures can be plucked at will, but rather that 'memory is akin to language'<sup>59</sup> and if it is a language, he argues, it is not something we simply add layer by layer to our life's experiences like

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<sup>58</sup> DeLillo, *Falling Man*, pp. 73-74.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Eaglestone, Keynote address at Institute of English Studies conference *After the War*, 6 May 2009.

new words in our lexicon; rather it is interwoven seamlessly. Eaglestone's idea of the subsumed, enveloped memory is made bizarrely literal, literally 'made flesh', by DeLillo, who physically interweaves memory into his characters' bodies. He explores the idea of what he calls 'organic shrapnel'; the fragments of flesh from the victims of a devastating explosion that catapult themselves into the bodies of those nearby. Organic shrapnel is both the signifier of the trauma as well as the signified; it is emblematic of a traumatic memory taken into the body, as well as a physical manifestation of that traumatic memory in the form of distinct bumps in the skin. As a medic removes splinters of glass from Keith's body, he explains how the human form of shrapnel enters the flesh:

'In those places where it happens, the survivors, the people nearby who are injured, sometimes, months later, they develop bumps, for lack of a better term, and it turns out this is caused by small fragments, tiny fragments of the suicide bomber's body. The bomber is blown to bits, literally bits and pieces, and fragments of flesh and bone come flying outward with such force and velocity that they get wedged, they get trapped in the body of anyone who's in striking range. Do you believe it? A student is sitting in a café. She survives the attack. Then, months later, they find these little, like, pellets of flesh, human flesh that got driven into the skin. They call this organic shrapnel.'<sup>60</sup>

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, who was in a building opposite the World Trade Center that day, has admitted that he finds it very difficult to read 9/11 fiction and has not read *Falling Man*. However, when I asked him if DeLillo's idea of organic shrapnel resonated with him, he found it very affecting. It was not a notion that he had encountered before, but I asked him if those who died have on a metaphorical level marked him, entered the consciousness, entered the heart?

That's a very powerful metaphor I think. Very. I think it makes sense.  
Yes, that's right. And what I think of too, in metaphorical terms is of

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<sup>60</sup> Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p 16.

course the transplantation of someone else's flesh into your own is normally medically a good thing. But this isn't. Or at least... is it?<sup>61</sup>

The testimony of a survivor would therefore suggest that the idea of organic shrapnel does indeed resonate on the level of both signifier and signified. Dr Williams' immediate uncertainty about whether it can only be regarded as a grotesque clash with the idea of the life-saving transplant, would suggest that the idea of such shrapnel is more than simply grotesque; that there is perhaps a form of traumatic memorializing at stake here. DeLillo extrapolates further from the idea of memory being interwoven into the flesh, by using the motif of organic shrapnel in other ways. He uses the term to define the effect that exposure to television images of 9/11 had on viewers. While Lianne was not physically injured in the 9/11 attacks, nevertheless the traumatic experience has pierced her skin:

Every time she saw a videotape of the planes she moved a finger toward the power button on the remote. Then she kept on watching. The second plane coming out of that ice blue sky, this was the footage that entered the body, that seemed to run beneath her skin, the fleeting sprint that carried lives and histories, theirs and hers, everyone's, into some other distance, out beyond the towers.<sup>62</sup>

In 1988 DeLillo gave an interview that effectively rehearsed the views ascribed to Lianne in *Falling Man*, that the television footage of 9/11 had 'entered the body' and 'seemed to run beneath her skin'. DeLillo spoke about the life-changing experience that occurred when he watched the television coverage of the assassination of President Kennedy:

it's possible I wouldn't have become the kind of writer I am if it weren't for the assassination. ...As the years have flowed away from that point, I think we've all come to feel that what's been missing over these past twenty-five years is a sense of a manageable reality. Much of that feeling can be traced to that one moment in Dallas. We seem much more aware

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<sup>61</sup> Rowan Williams interviewed by Charlie Lee-Potter, 3 April 2013.

<sup>62</sup> Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p 134.



of elements like randomness and ambiguity and chaos since then. ...It's strange that the power of television was utilized to its fullest, perhaps for the first time, as it pertained to a violent event. Not only a violent, but, of course, an extraordinarily significant event. This has become part of our consciousness. We've developed almost a sense of performance as it applies to televised events. And I think some of the people who are essential to such events ... are simply carrying their performing selves out of the wings and into the theatre. Such young men have a sense of the way in which their acts will be perceived by the rest of us, even as they commit the acts. So there is a deeply self-referential element in our lives that wasn't there before.<sup>63</sup>

The event 'entered the consciousness', much as organic shrapnel might enter the flesh, permanently and distinctly. DeLillo makes clear the impact of that flesh wound; without it, it is possible he 'wouldn't have become the kind of writer I am.' The transformative effect of traumatic memory, whether displayed physically or not, is clearly stated. It is explored by DeLillo elsewhere too, in different manifestations. After the death of her mother, Lianne walks into an art gallery to look at the familiar Giorgio Morandi paintings that reminded her so strongly of the Twin Towers. DeLillo once again invokes notions of organic shrapnel; at times Lianne absorbs the shrapnel/memory of her mother into herself, at other times she wraps herself around the shrapnel/memory in a desperate attempt to assimilate it, to *be* it. It is not a comforting idea, rather a disturbing notion of devouring as well as being devoured:

There was something hidden in the painting. Nina's living room was there, memory and motion. The objects in the painting faded into the figures behind them, the woman smoking in the chair, the standing man. In time she moved on to the next painting and the next, fixing each in her mind... She was passing beyond pleasure into some kind of assimilation. She was trying to absorb what she saw, take it home, wrap it around her, sleep in it... Turn it into living tissue, who you are. ... All the paintings and drawings carried the same title. *Natura Morta*. Even this, the term for

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<sup>63</sup> *Conversations with Don DeLillo*, ed. by Thomas DePietro, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), p. 57.

still life, yielded her mother's last days.<sup>64</sup>

DeLillo had already experimented with the idea of sitting in an art gallery and being invaded both by the art and by a fellow visitor. His 2002 short story *Baader-Meinhof* describes a woman drawn irresistibly to a series of paintings in a New York art gallery. DeLillo is not specific, but it seems likely that the gallery is MOMA which, in February 2002, exhibited the Baader-Meinhof paintings of Gerhard Richter, the same artist who tried and failed to paint 9/11, as discussed in my introduction. In DeLillo's story the fragile and lonely woman allows a man she meets in the gallery to accompany her home. Feeling threatened, she shuts herself in the bathroom as he masturbates on the other side of the door. The devouring of or being devoured by experience and by memory seems to be linked to DeLillo's complaint that we have lacked a 'manageable reality' since JFK was murdered in 1963. He maintained that television, once the recorder of memory, is now a false witness. It has become the medium that does not so much record the event as provoke the event, making us 'deeply self-referential'. There is a sense in Lianne's mind, when she sees the falling man hanging by the train track, that she should both absorb the event as she might organic shrapnel, as well as record the event as a film camera might:

She tried to connect this man to the moment when she'd stood beneath the elevated tracks, nearly three years ago, watching someone prepare to fall from a maintenance platform as the train went past. There were no photographs of that fall. She was the photograph, the photosensitive surface. That nameless body coming down, this was hers to record and absorb.<sup>65</sup>

The Morandi paintings, the video footage of the towers falling, the image of the falling man have all entered the flesh and, having done so, been transmuted into 'living tissue'. The trajectories of *Falling Man*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* have taken us past a craving for 'retrogenesis', via the child-like desire of Justin to make a world in which he makes 'something better than it really was, the towers, still standing

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<sup>64</sup> DeLillo, *Falling Man*, pp. 210-211

<sup>65</sup> DeLillo, *Falling Man* p. 223.

...<sup>66</sup> – en route to a world in which the organic shrapnel of 9/11 has entered the consciousness subliminally but indelibly. Oskar lays his Grandfather's letters to his unknown son, inside the bodiless grave of his father. Lianne preserves the memories of her Alzheimer's patients by clipping their stories into a large file. Each is attempting to bear redemptive witness, although there is an inevitable fragility to the gestures.

Of the three novelists I have cited, perhaps DeLillo is best equipped to wrestle with the complexities of representing 9/11. As Mark Binelli and many others have noted, he has, after all, done it already.<sup>67</sup> Terrorists have been characters in his novels since *Players* in 1977, a work in which a man plots to blow up the New York Stock Exchange. The man's wife works for a firm called the Grief Management Council, which is based in the World Trade Center, which had been formally inaugurated only four years before this novel was published. She believes at first that the WTC was 'an unlikely headquarters for an outfit such as this. But she changed her mind as time passed. Where else would you stack all this grief?'<sup>68</sup> Bizarrely there is a scene in which she looks out on the building from a rooftop and a neighbour notes, 'That plane looks like it's going to hit.'<sup>69</sup>

Ten years after the publication of *Players*, DeLillo produced another novel that predicted further elements of the disaster that struck on 9/11. *White Noise* examined the notion of the 'airborne toxic event'. Then, in 1991, he published *Mao II*. The writer Toby Litt, in a critical review of *Falling Man* in which he likened the writing to that of the military thriller writer Andy McNab, said that DeLillo had no need to write a post-9/11 novel:

for the truth is that, in *Mao II*, DeLillo had already written his great 9/11 novel long before the specific date and the event had happened to come around. He even identified the target: 'Out the south windows the Trade towers stood cut against the night, intensely massed and near. This is

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<sup>66</sup> DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p.102.

<sup>67</sup> Mark Binelli, 'Intensity of a Plot', *Guernica*, 17 July 2007, <[http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/intensity\\_of\\_a\\_plot/](http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/intensity_of_a_plot/)> [accessed 15 May 2013].

<sup>68</sup> Don DeLillo, *Players*, (1977; London: Vintage, 1991), p.18.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

the word “loomed” in all its prolonged and impending force.’<sup>70</sup>

According to Michiko Kakutani no writer ‘has been as prescient and eerily prophetic about twenty-first-century America as Don DeLillo.’ He continues:

His novels, from *Players* and *White Noise* through *Libra* and *Mao II* and the remarkable *Underworld*, not only limned the surreal weirdness of the waning years of the twentieth century, but somehow managed to anticipate the shock and horror of 9/11 and its darkly unspooling aftermath:

It was Mr. DeLillo who, years ago, wrote about the rise of the terrorist, ‘the lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for faith’; the power of crowds, melded by mass media into a violent, history-changing mob; the seduction of technology and its magnification of the glut and glare of pop culture; the institutionalization of paranoia and conspiracy thinking in the collective mind; and the realization that ‘the rules of what is thinkable’ have changed ineluctably in recent years.<sup>71</sup>

There is a burden of expectation on DeLillo that he should be our twenty-first-century seer. Reviews of his 2003 novel *Cosmopolis* included the invocation to pay attention because ‘DeLillo has always been good at telling us where we’re heading ... we ignore him at our peril.’<sup>72</sup> I don’t think it is fanciful to detect the world-weariness in DeLillo’s prose when the protagonist of *Cosmopolis* sees himself on screen:

Eric watched himself on the oval screen below the spycam, running his thumb along his chinline. The car stopped and moved and he realized

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<sup>70</sup> Toby Litt, ‘The Trembling Air’, *Guardian*, 26 May 2007  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/may/26/fiction.dondelillo>>  
[accessed 26 March 2013].

<sup>71</sup> Michiko Kakutani, ‘A Man, a Woman and a Day of Terror’, *New York Times*, May 9 2007, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/09/books/09kaku.html?pagewanted=all>>  
[accessed 25 March 2013].

<sup>72</sup> Blake Morrison, ‘Future Tense’, *Guardian*, 17 May 2003,  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/may/17/fiction.dondelillo>>  
[accessed 25 March 2013].

queerly that he'd just placed his thumb on his chinline, a second or two after he'd seen it on-screen...

'Shiner told me our network is secure.'

'Then it is'.

'Then why am I seeing things that haven't happened yet?'<sup>73</sup>

DeLillo has been seeing things 'that haven't happened yet' for thirty-five years, and in this light it's possible to see longer shadows in his character Nina's statement that 'Nothing is next, there is no next. This was next'. Is this the prophet-novelist laying down his tarot cards and saying that he is no longer in the predictions game, that his own retrogenesis is being enacted and that nothing is next? The most extreme version of what he has been warning about has happened so there is nothing more to say. Possibly, and as I will now examine, that would certainly explain why *Falling Man* is such a small, confined, almost domestic novel, rather than the vast, sprawling, apocalyptic landscape we have become so used to.

DeLillo's character Bill Gray in *Mao II* complains that terrorists have taken over the role of the novelist whose purpose he says is to 'alter the inner life of the culture'.<sup>74</sup> DeLillo certainly appears to believe that storytelling can elevate events into territory where meaning can be found. After 9/11 DeLillo wrote an essay called 'In the Ruins of the Future' in which he neatly balanced the equation between news and storytelling, coming down firmly in favour of the power of the story. He opted to use the word 'narrative' as a means of defining the precise events as they occurred and elected to use the word 'counternarrative' to describe the literary edifice that elevates facts to fiction. 'The narrative ends in the rubble', he said, 'and it is left to us to create the counternarrative.' He went on to say that 'People running for their lives are part of the story that is left to us' and that is because 'they take us beyond the hard numbers of dead and missing and give us a glimpse of elevated being.' There is a subversive sense here that DeLillo is aligning himself as a freedom fighter. Just as terrorism is met by counter-terrorism, so misleading, ostensibly factual narrative that inevitably encompasses only one point of view, must be met with

<sup>73</sup> Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* (2003; London: Scribner, 2004), p 22.

<sup>74</sup> Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (1991; London: Vintage, 1992), p. 41.

counter-narrative.

In a powerful definition of what it means to take the events of a cataclysmic day like 9/11 and to extend them into the territory where they might be given some meaning or grant us a 'glimpse of elevated being', DeLillo said that such a day does not succumb to 'the mercies of analogy or simile.' This is a similar observation to that made by Andrew O'Hagan when he appeared to attack novelists but in fact abused journalists:

metaphors fell dead from their mouths before the astonishing live pictures. It did not help us to be told by imaginative writers that the second plane was like someone posting a letter. No, it wasn't. It was like a passenger jet crashing into an office building. It gave us nothing to be told that the South Tower came down like an elevator at full speed. No, it didn't. It collapsed like a building that could no longer hold itself up.<sup>75</sup>

There are striking similarities here to the words and tone adopted by Richard Ford, when he complained that a public official failed to capture in language what the loss of New Orleans signified. DeLillo's approach to that lack of vocabulary was to fill what he called the 'howling space' with small, seemingly inconsequential things. He argued that 'the cellphones, the lost shoes, the handkerchiefs mashed in the faces of running men and women' are more important than the big picture subjects of politics and history. 'The writer tries to give memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space.' It does not seem to me that Don DeLillo takes 'memory, tenderness and meaning' to include within it a duty to offer interpretation or explanation. 'Meaning' in DeLillo's context appears to suggest significance rather than clarification. In *Falling Man* his character Lianne is fascinated by two still life paintings by the Italian artist Giorgio Morandi. The definition 'still life' carries within it connotations of captured life, of life brought to a halt, of time reassuringly suspended. But DeLillo is of Italian descent and as he makes clear, is all too

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<sup>75</sup> Andrew O'Hagan, 'Racing Against Reality', *New York Review of Books*, June 28 2007, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2007/jun/28/racing-against-reality/?pagination=false> [accessed 25 March 2013].

familiar with the Italian phrase for the 'still life'. The harmless assembly of objects, vases, pots and bowls that Morandi painted repeatedly throughout his life, are in fact called *la natura morta*, or dead life. As DeLillo put it, 'the Italian term for still life seemed stronger than it had to be.'

Lianne looks endlessly at the two 'dead life' paintings. She is mesmerized by one of them in particular, a painting of assorted boxes and biscuit tins against a dark background. Every time she looks at them she sees the twin towers, but she refuses to judge them or to give them significance. 'Let the latent meanings turn and bend in the wind, free from authoritative comment' she resolves. When Lianne's previously vibrant and vivacious mother is close to death she views her too as she might a *natura morta*:

It was difficult to see her fitted so steadfastly to a piece of furniture, resigned and unstimulating, the energetic arbiter of her daughter's life, ever discerning, the woman who'd given birth to the word *beautiful*, for what excites admiration in art, ideas, objects, in the faces of men and women, the mind of a child. All this dwindling to a human breath.<sup>76</sup>

DeLillo appears to have adjusted his view about the importance of journalism over the past two decades. At the start of the 1990s he said that he 'perceived a new level of significance for the simple news of the day, on radio, on television in the newspapers and in the magazines. The news seemed to have more force than it had in previous years. Now does that really affect the influence of novels in our time?'<sup>77</sup> But I contend that in writing *Falling Man* more than a decade later, DeLillo has changed his perspective. The giant canvas of his earlier novels on which he attempted to paint his competitive counter-blasts to the news journalism of his day, has been swapped for a much smaller picture. His technique has become miniaturized as the events he has been describing have become larger in scale. It is a reversal of approach that has bemused some

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<sup>76</sup> Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p 48.

<sup>77</sup> Don DeLillo interviewed by Mark Binelli, 'Intensity of a Plot', *Guernica*, 17 July 2007, <[http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/intensity\\_of\\_a\\_plot/](http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/intensity_of_a_plot/)> [accessed 26 March 2013].

critics, who have complained that *Falling Man* is 'spindly'<sup>78</sup> or that it is 'ambitious in scope but not in scale. It is scrupulously domestic, relentlessly downbeat. If a scene can be shown in retrospect, it is; if it can have the dramatic stuffing knocked out of it in advance, all the better.'<sup>79</sup>

Could it be that the events themselves have become so large and so hugely publicized, theatricalized almost, that Don DeLillo is now attempting to pursue the opposite trajectory? That is not to say that he is opting for the mundane, the trivial: far from it. As he himself put it, 'I do try to confront realities.' But crucially he went on to say that 'people would rather read about their own marriages and separations and trips to Tanglewood'.<sup>80</sup> After all, where do most people read about marriages and separations but in newspapers, magazines and gossip columns? But he doesn't reserve his criticism simply for gossip writers, complaining that there's 'an entire school of American fiction which might be called around-the-house-and-in-the-yard. And I think people like to read this kind of work because it adds a certain luster, a certain significance to their own lives.'<sup>81</sup> This is not the kind of fiction he is aiming for, but neither is he trying to take journalists on as they play their game of declamatory side-taking. Don DeLillo's new genre is fiction in miniature, where the lost shoes, the missing briefcases and the memories of those suffering from dementia signify so much more than their material worth.

These small details matter for Foer too; they are the means by which he spins a delicate and sometimes precarious confection, linking 9/11 with Dresden, Hiroshima, heredity, love and hope. Oskar seeks to trace every person called Black in New York as well as every lock, a cohort that he calculates numbers 472 and 162 million respectively. With parallels to DeLillo's *The Players*, where terrorists attempt to impose order on their apparently chaotic system of operating, Oskar succeeds in creating random connections that did not exist before. He moves in the opposite direction to his incompatible grandparents

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<sup>78</sup> Michiko Kakutani, *New York Times*, May 9, 2007.

<sup>79</sup> Toby Litt, *Guardian*, May 26, 2007.

<sup>80</sup> Robert R. Harris 'A Talk with Don DeLillo', *New York Times* 10 October 1982. [accessed 9 February 2013].

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.



whose drive to create 'nothing places' leads them to live a life where there is more nothing than something. Oskar's grandfather cannot speak and Oskar's grandmother knowingly types out her life story on a typewriter with no ribbon. Oskar's friend Mr. A. R. Black, who lives on the floor above, records a life of no meaning by writing out hundreds of thousands of entries for his card index, matching each name with a single word that is meant to define them. His entries, complete with tabloid exclamation marks, resemble newspaper headlines of the mono-word 'Gotcha' variety:

"Henry Kissinger: war!  
 "Ornette Coleman: music!  
 "Che Guevara: war!  
 "Jeff Bezos: money!  
 "Philip Guston: art!  
 "Mahatma Gandhi: war!"  
 "But he was a pacifist," I said.  
 "Right! War!  
 "Arthur Ashe: tennis!  
 "Tom Cruise: money!  
 "Elie Wiesel: war!  
 "Arnold Schwarzenegger: war!  
 "Martha Stewart: money!  
 "Rem Koolhaas: architecture!  
 "Ariel Sharon: war!  
 "Mick Jagger: money!  
 "Yasir Arafat: war!  
 "Susan Sontag: thought!  
 "Wolfgang Puck: money!  
 "Pope John Paul II: war!"<sup>82</sup>

These are the celebrities of whom newspapers speak, not ordinary people like Oskar's father who, to Oskar's deep and crushing disappointment, does not

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<sup>82</sup> Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, pp. 157-158.

have an entry. But later, when Oskar plunders Mr Black's card index, he finds that ordinary people get entries after all. There, in all its touching and redemptive glory, is a listing for one Oskar Schell, for whom the defining word is 'son', which is after all what both he is and his father was.

In shared but different ways these three novels explore the power of little details, minutiae, the small lives set against the backdrop, just like Giorgio Morandi's mundane bottles, vases, Ovaltine tins and boxes, painted and rearranged endlessly in his Bologna bedroom and studio. And like Morandi's props, they too are both drawn in close-up and yet are emptied of the specific too. In an interview recorded by *Voice of America* on 25 April 1957 Morandi defined the artist's creativity and inventiveness as the ability to 'get past those ... conventional images which place themselves between him and things.' And asked what he thought of abstract art he declared that 'In my opinion nothing is abstract. In fact I don't think there's anything more surreal, or more abstract than reality.'<sup>83</sup>

Morandi was a devotee of Cézanne's and it is said that he lived by the advice that Cézanne once gave to Ambroise Vollard. Cézanne cautioned against doing things on a large and showy scale because 'the grandiose grows tiresome' (his example was that disaster-epic *The Raft of the Medusa*).<sup>84</sup> It is a mantra that has been applied by DeLillo to *Falling Man*, and by both Foer and Hamid too. All three 9/11 novels deliver a sense of the surreal against which are set the small lives of a few characters, our view of them unobscured by the 'conventional images' so loathed by Morandi. DeLillo's vast work *Underworld* closes with a trance-like look at the Morandi-like objects on his desk, as though he can stare and then write them into meaningful reality:

the apple core going sepia in the lunch tray, and the dense measures of experience in a random glance, the monk's candle reflected in the slope of the phone, hours marked in Roman numerals, and the glaze of the

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<sup>83</sup> Giorgio Morandi, cited by Museo Morandi, Bologna  
<[http://www.museomorandi.it/index\\_net.htm](http://www.museomorandi.it/index_net.htm)>  
[accessed 24 March 2013].

<sup>84</sup> Ambroise Vollard, *Cézanne* (New York: Dover, 1984), p. 67.

wax, and the curl of the braided wick, and the chipped rim of the mug that your yellow pencils, skewed all crazy, and the plied lives of the simplest surface, the slabbed butter melting on the crumbled bun, and the yellow of the yellow of the pencils, and you try to imagine the word on the screen becoming a thing in the world, taking all its meanings ...<sup>85</sup>

As I have suggested, there is a curious smallness to DeLillo's 9/11 work by comparison with the novels that preceded it. *Falling Man* is almost domestic in scale, (although it is not 'domesticating' in the way so mistrusted and disliked by Rowan Williams); its 'braided wick' and the 'plied lives of the simplest surface', which incidentally are so redolent of Eaglestone's definition of memory as being 'interwoven', are oddly affecting when set against the backdrop of 9/11. It should be added, however, that there is a conscious vacuity here that ultimately defeats the characters' attempts at redemptive force. Hamid's work too is slight and modest in scale. He wrote seven separate drafts of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, using a first person narrative, a third person narrative, an American protagonist, a Pakistani protagonist and a combination of the two. His first draft, finished in July 2001, was by his own admission vast, but the final form that he chose was miniature in scale. (Hamid described the first draft, completed two months before the 9/11 attacks, as a 'quiet fable about a man's disenchantment with corporate America and his desire to go home.' He added a little wryly that 'it's still that.'<sup>86</sup>) The roughly three hours it takes to read the novel is matched by the three-hour time span of the narrative. It is, in a sense, a rejoinder to the journalistic discourse that has consistently opted for extreme and inadequate 'common framings' decried by BBC programme editor Kevin Marsh. Hamid's text deliberately takes the opposing stance:

[it] mimics the global media where so often you hear one side of the story. My novel is written in a form that takes the reverse side of the media; it hands the content over to the reluctant fundamentalist. It is equally biased. The reader has to realize, though, that the novel is only a version of the truth.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, (1997; London: Picador, 1998), p. 827.

<sup>86</sup> Mohsin Hamid on *Book Club*, BBC Radio 4, 4 September 2011.

<sup>87</sup> Mohsin Hamid interviewed by Anna H. R. Khan, *Stanford Daily*, 23 April 2007.

It is a measure of the intellectual heft of these novels that they claim only to offer a small version of the truth, not the truth itself; but it is a truth that alchemically transforms the Ovaltine tins, the boxes and the vases into something with meaning, just as Morandi did. The braided wick and the plied lives represent a more conscious, overt attempt by writers of fiction to define 9/11 in all its complexities than Richard Ford had attempted. As DeLillo put it, 'I didn't want to write a novel in which the attacks occur over the character's right shoulder and affect a few lives in a distant sort of way. I wanted to be in the towers and in the planes.'<sup>88</sup> The following chapter turns to the work of Paul Auster, who did not want to 'be in the towers and in the planes', but attempted to engage with the 9/11 catastrophe by envisaging a counterhistorical set of verities. Like Hamid, DeLillo and Foer he engages in temporal experimentation, but the question is whether his success is any more resounding.

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<sup>88</sup> Binelli, 'Intensity of a Plot', 17 July 2007

## CHAPTER 3: PAUL AUSTER AND THE POST-PAST

### Introduction

The story is not in the words; it's in the  
struggle<sup>1</sup>

Paul Auster

Paul Auster, creator of novels, plays, screenplays, essays and poems for more than thirty years, has wrestled doggedly with the crises and conundrums of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Terrorism, war, violence, surveillance, murder, blackmail, infidelity and death have been his creative territory for so long that his harsher critics have sometimes wondered acerbically when he might stop.<sup>2</sup> As a resident of New York it is not surprising that he appeared to have a sense of moral obligation to respond artistically to the 9/11 attacks. To a collection of reminiscences and reflections on 9/11, Auster contributed the short, fumbling piece of prose he wrote on the afternoon of 9/11, named, appositely, 'Random Notes'. The awkwardness of the prose was matched by the clumsiness of the collection's title: *110 Stories* referenced both the number of stories in the volume as well as the number of storeys in the World Trade Center.

Auster was in New York on 9/11; it had been his teenage daughter's first day at her Manhattan high school and he and his wife, the writer Siri Hustvedt, had allowed her to travel alone on the subway for the first time:

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Auster, 'The Locked Room', *The New York Trilogy* (1985; London: Faber & Faber, 1987), p. 294.

<sup>2</sup> James Wood, 'Shallow Graves', *New Yorker*, 30 November 2009.

Less than an hour after she passed under the World Trade Center, the twin towers crumbled to the ground.

From the top floor of our house, we can see the smoke filling the sky of the city. The wind is blowing toward Brooklyn today, and the smells of the fire have settled into every room of the house. A terrible, stinging odor: flaming plastic, electric wire, building materials.<sup>3</sup>

The fragment of prose is noteworthy for being a contemporaneous response to 9/11 but it has little literary heft. The evocation of the smells of burning drifting towards his house is imprecise and formulaic. It is hard too to associate Auster's banal assertion that the 'the twin towers crumbled to the ground' with the buildings' actual collapse; indeed it is difficult to imagine that, in choosing such a phrase, he had at the point of writing even witnessed the towers' destruction, although we must assume that he had. His decision to force the verb 'crumbled' to bear the weight of so much destruction is artistically and lexically limited and his attempt to describe the burning smell that permeated his house reads oddly like clumsy olfactory guesswork. How much finer was Richard Ford's description of the buildings' final moments, anthropomorphized as the Queen Regent Hotel in *The Lay of the Land* and analyzed in my first chapter. It is true that Ford had the advantage of time to filter and refine his prose. But Martin Amis, on 18 September 2001, succeeded in finding language that was infinitely more resonant than Auster's, with the advantage of only seven more days:

no visionary cinematic genius could hope to recreate the majestic abjection of that double surrender, with the scale of the buildings conferring its own slow motion. It was well understood that an edifice so demonstrably comprised of concrete and steel would also become an

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Auster, 'Random Notes – September 11, 2001, 4.00 p.m', *110 Stories: New York Writes after September 11* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), p. 34. All subsequent references are to this edition.

unforgettable metaphor. This moment was the apotheosis of the postmodern era – the era of images and perceptions.<sup>4</sup>

Ian McEwan, on September 15, reached for the metaphysical, once again in contrast to Auster's more pedestrian prose:

The hijackers used fanatical certainty, misplaced religious faith, and dehumanising hatred to purge themselves of the human instinct for empathy. Among their crimes was a failure of the imagination. As for their victims in the planes and in the towers, in their terror they would not have felt it at the time, but those snatched and anguished assertions of love were their defiance.<sup>5</sup>

It is true that McEwan's response has anaesthetising, consoling tendencies, in the same way that I suggested Tony Blair's and Richard Ford's words did in Chapter 1, but how much more 'worked' is the prose than Auster's.

The difficulties that Auster faced in transacting what he experienced that day, despite having the apparent advantage of actually being there, underlines the challenges raised in Chapter 2 about the universality of the witness experience on 9/11: since the whole world saw what happened, as it happened, Auster's claim to the benefit of 'vicinity' lost its historic advantage. What privilege did the couple of miles distance between the disaster and Auster's viewpoint give him? None, it would seem, when his capacity to describe what he saw was so muted. His prose lacks the gravitas of the deponent and reads more like the hasty testimony of the prevaricator. It was in fact no better at translating the moment into words than television presenter Katie Couric's 'it looks like a film.' (The paucity of the phrase was underlined, albeit unintentionally, by Martin Amis who declared in his 9/11 essay *The Second Plane* that no Hollywood film director would have signed up to the grotesque impossibility of a script as fantastical as 9/11.)

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Amis, 'The Second Plane', in *The Second Plane* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), pp. 4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Ian McEwan, 'Only Love and then Oblivion', *Guardian*, 15 September 2001 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/sep/15/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety2>> [accessed 1st March 2013].

In this chapter I will assess the ways that Auster, ill-equipped to ‘translate the moment’, turned instead to the idea of using the moment to cast a long, more generalized shadow over what came after. The impact of a single, unexpected tragedy had wrought this effect on Auster before. When he was fourteen years old and at summer camp with a group of other children, he was caught in a severe storm. It was an experience that, he has said repeatedly, ‘probably formed my view of the world more than anything else that ever happened to me’:

We were lost in the woods and a very extreme electric storm broke out above us with lightning spears jumping into the ground – it was like being under a bombardment.

One boy said it would be better to go into a clearing and we went single file under a barbed wire fence. The boy in front of me was directly under the fence when lightning struck it. He was killed instantly but we didn’t know it.

We pulled him through and were lying in the field with him as the storm raged – I remember holding his tongue so he wouldn’t swallow it and watching his skin turn blue. If you see that when you are 14 years old, you begin to sense that the world is a lot less stable than you thought it was.

Life is not neatly boxed. You go into work one day, and a plane flies into the building and you’re incinerated.<sup>6</sup>

Auster has repeated this story many times over the decades. I have chosen this version of his experience because in the retelling, for the first time, he appeared to link the trauma suffered by his fourteen-year-old self with the horrors confronted by his fifty-four-year old self. After 9/11 he responded in a curiously

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Auster, interviewed by Helena de Bertodano, *Telegraph*, 16 Nov 2010.



similar way, defining it as a single catastrophic event that would be both defining and insurmountable:

I've always known that there is catastrophe in the world; I've lived in the shadow of it in my mind all my life. But as a New Yorker, and as a flesh-and-blood human being, 9/11 has had an enormous effect. I'm not over it yet, and I don't think I ever will be. It was the worst day in the history of the city.<sup>7</sup>

The two events, forty years apart, appear to have elided in some way, certainly in this version of his experience at least. However, because Auster has repeated the anecdote so many times but without initially referencing 9/11, it is hard to apply the notion of Freud's *Nachtraglichkeit* in its sense of the second event giving the first a retrospective meaning. Rather I would suggest that, perversely, the first event gave meaning to the *second* and that arguably a form of the regressive *Nachtraglichkeit* occurred when the threat to his daughter's life unfolded on 11 September. In this chapter I assemble evidence to establish my view that 9/11 stands as a defining edifice in Auster's artistic endeavour, as a form of frame narrative to the artistic imagination that has been developing since the day his summer camp friend was killed.

Auster's insistence on repeatedly gnawing and worrying at contemporary tragedies has not won him universal praise, or even credit for trying. Indeed some of his critics seem to believe he is guilty of a banal neuroticism. James Wood, perhaps the most waspish, has likened the novelist's productivity levels to an automated printing press: 'The pleasing, slightly facile books come out almost every year, as tidy and punctual as postage stamps, and the applauding reviewers line up like eager stamp collectors to get the latest issue.'<sup>8</sup> Wood drew a dotted line between Paul Auster and his identically initialled protagonist Peter Aaron from the novel *Leviathan*, and cruelly nudged us to connect the incriminating dots: Aaron, aka Auster, says that 'I have always been a plodder,

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Auster interviewed by Andrew Van Der Vlies, 'The Tyrannies and Epiphanies of Chance', *Oxonian Review*, 15 June 2004.

<<http://www.oxonianreview.org/wp/the-tyrannies-and-epiphanies-of-chance/>> [accessed 7 May 2013].

<sup>8</sup> Wood, 'Shallow Graves' 30 November 2009.

a person who anguishes and struggles over each sentence, and even on my best days I do no more than inch along, crawling on my belly like a man lost in the desert. The smallest word is surrounded by acres of silence for me.’ Wood’s acerbic comment is ‘Not enough silence, alas.’<sup>9</sup>

While elegantly phrased, this is harsh, and Auster’s eventual response to 9/11 is more complex than the journalistic piece written in its aftermath. In this chapter I analyze Auster’s recourse to silence in his work, although not the kind of taciturnity that James Wood slightly facetiously requested. In addition, in the context of the two defining moments of trauma suffered when he was fourteen and fifty-four, I examine the way in which Auster exploits references to the past, the present and the future. My conclusion is that ‘the worst day in the history of the city’ has wrought a change in his temporal response. His is not the backwards, regressive glance of DeLillo or Foer discussed in the previous chapter, or the metaphorical methodology favoured by Ford; rather it is the envisaging of an alternative counterfactual universe in which different outcomes are explored, a strategy that I term Auster’s literary hyperparallelism. I have chosen the hyperbolic geometrical term ‘hyperparallel’ because it reflects the link between Auster’s imagined alternative universe and the ‘real’ universe, without relying on the Euclidean idea of parallels mirroring each other precisely without intersecting. Since Auster’s imagined world is both the same and different to the real world, the notion of the hyperparallel seems more appropriate and meaningful. Using hyperbolic geometry has the added advantage of unhitching the entities it describes from any temporal classification.

As I will explain, Auster’s attempts to imagine a different American landscape start with a break from the past. Rather than DeLillo’s character’s plaintive cry that ‘there is no next’, Auster’s characters proclaim that there should be no before. The three fundamental aims of this chapter are first to examine the effect of traumatic end-stops on Auster’s literary life, in other words his childhood experience and the 9/11 traumas. In addition, I will assess the importance of silence in response to the politics of 9/11. Finally, in examining

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

the three book cycle of *The Brooklyn Follies*, *Man in the Dark* and *Sunset Park*, I will explore the gradual adjustments Auster has made to his temporal response as a result of 9/11, from the post-past, via the pre-future and finally to the absolute present. As a cycle there is a clear development in the treatment of temporality across the novels, but with an endeavour to avoid the kind of fictions defined by Frank Kermode as those 'whose ends are consonant with origins, and in concord, however unexpected, with their precedents, satisfy our needs.'<sup>10</sup> Auster's attempt to avoid the end (as well as to 'satisfy our needs') is however always flawed and floored by his domineering and intrusive end-stop of 9/11.

## Part One: Auster's Post-past and Pre-future

We've entered a new era, Nathan. The post-family, post-student, post-past age...

Paul Auster, *The Brooklyn Follies*

Auster concluded his 'Random Notes' jotted down at 4.00 pm on the afternoon of 11 September 2001, with the words: 'And so the twenty-first century begins.'<sup>11</sup> This then is the break with the past and the start of something painfully new. In his first instinctive, unmediated response to 9/11 Auster is at least clear on this one thing. That day established Auster's sense that from now on the world is living in the 'post-past age'.<sup>12</sup>

The place on which Auster reflected, or rather the *absence* of place, the World Trade Center, is territory he wrote about in very different circumstances decades before; then he described the WTC in terms of rapture and awe. The startling event took place in 1974. Auster's friend, the clandestine French high-

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<sup>10</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (1967; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Auster, 'Random Notes', *110 Stories*.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Auster, *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005; London: Faber & Faber, 2006), p. 22. All subsequent references are to this edition.

wire performance artist Philippe Petit, shocked and entranced those who saw him, when he walked on a steel wire strung by his accomplices between the Twin Towers. Viewing footage of that seemingly impossible experiment now, it is all the more memorable for the playful way in which Petit performed his art. Almost 1,400 feet above them, Petit appeared to tease his audience and to linger on his aerial wire far longer than he needed to simply to garner the wreath as the only man ever to do so. It was an event that Auster witnessed, writing about it in 1982, with a postmodern appreciation of the sublime nature of the experiment:

the appeal of it, finally, is its utter uselessness. No art, it seems to me, so clearly emphasizes the deep aesthetic impulse inside us all. Each time we see a man walk on the wire, a part of us is up there with him. Unlike performances in the other arts, the experience of the high wire is direct, unmediated, simple, and it requires no explanation whatsoever. The art is the thing itself, a life in its most naked delineation. And if there is beauty in this, it is because of the beauty we feel inside ourselves.<sup>13</sup>

But, writing on the afternoon of 11 September 2001, Auster revisited the location of Petit's subversive triumph, still describing his feat as an 'act of indelible beauty' but concluding that this 'same spot has been turned into a place of death.' As in the example cited in my introduction, Auster's unmediated, hastily produced prose is weak and clichéd, oddly similar to that used by Nathan's daughter in Auster's 2005 novel *The Brooklyn Follies*. The novel is set, like Ford's *The Lay of the Land*, against the backdrop of Gore's failure to take the presidency. To Nathan's disgust his daughter resorts to using hackneyed phrases like 'a living hell'. Perhaps this suggests Auster's own prose is strongest when time has elapsed between the experience and the telling, and it would certainly suggest that since Auster allows Nathan the perspicacity to see his own daughter's inadequate prose that he must detect the signs of it in himself. Even though Petit's act may be 'indelible', asserts Auster, the place itself is deathly. The scale both of Petit's triumph and of the buildings themselves had made the combination sublime. But the destruction of the

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Auster, 'On the High Wire', *The Red Notebook* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), pp. 91-92. All subsequent references are to this edition.

buildings, from the colossus they had been to the dust they had become, stripped away any trace of the magnificent, leaving only the 'indelible beauty' of the original act.

So this, believes Auster, is the day that 'the twenty-first century begins.' It is possible to trace, from this moment, a break with the past in Paul Auster's writing. Post 9/11 there are instances in Auster's fiction that explicitly define human existence as being a state of being in which there is no past. This is very different to his earlier work where the past is as much a character in his protagonists' lives as the present and future. In one of his earliest works *Ghosts*, a man is confronted by the past in the most explicit terms. Revisiting the Alpine landscape where his father had died in an avalanche twenty-five years before, the man finds a body:

as he bent down and looked at the face of the corpse, he had the distinct and terrifying impression that he was looking at himself. Trembling with fear, as the article put it, he inspected the body more closely, all sealed away as it was in the ice, like someone on the other side of a thick window, and saw that it was his father. The dead man was still young, even younger than his son was now, and there was something awesome about it, Blue felt, something so odd and terrible about being older than your own father.<sup>14</sup>

There are striking similarities between this vision of a body trapped beneath the ice and the two references to frozen words trapped beneath the ice in Kamila Shamsie's novel *Burnt Shadows*. Shamsie uses the words to establish a memorial to those who have died. In a not dissimilar way, Auster uses the image of the frozen body as a testament to the past. In this scene Auster combined the past, present and future of both father and son, each timeframe interlinked and overlapped. But by 2005, in *The Brooklyn Follies*, Auster has excised his characters' past and pushed them, untethered, into a state of pastlessness. Tom Wood, the stolid but thoughtful thirty-something year old, has lost his aspirations for academic greatness but has failed to replace his

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Auster, 'Ghosts', *The New York Trilogy* (1985; London: Faber & Faber, 1987), p. 153.

discarded ambitions with anything else. From this point there is 'a new era', Tom explains to his uncle Nathan Glass. 'The post-family, post-student, post-past age of Glass and Wood, 'a new era':

'Post-past?'

'The now. And also the later. But no more dwelling on the then.'

'Water under the bridge, Tom.'

The ex-Dr Thumb closed his eyes, tilted back his head, and shot a forefinger into the air, as if trying to remember something he'd forgotten long ago. Then, in a somber, mock-theatrical voice, he recited the opening lines of Raleigh's 'Farewell to Court':

Like truthless dreams, so are my joys expired,  
And past return are all my dandled days,  
My love misled, and fancy quite retired:  
Of all which past, the sorrow only stays.<sup>15</sup>

Petit's 'act of indelible beauty' has become fatally transmuted into Raleigh's weary assertion that 'the sorrow only stays.' Tom's break with the past has led him to abandon his studies at Ann Arbor and to arrive in New York, the fabulous city where a past is not required; a twenty-eight year old 'without a clue as to where he was headed or what turn his life was about to take'. Tom takes the job that so many rootless immigrants to the city are obliged to take; taxi driver. Even if he does not have 'a clue as to where he was headed' he is paid to take other people where they want to go. And it is a job where human life reveals itself, in all its forms:

You name it, Harry, and I've seen it. Masturbation, fornication,  
intoxication in all its forms. Puke and semen, shit and piss, blood and

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<sup>15</sup> Auster, *The Brooklyn Follies*, p. 22.

tears. At one time or another, every human liquid has spilled onto the backseat of my cab.<sup>16</sup>

But just as Philippe Petit produced a moment of ‘indelible beauty’ from something essentially meaningless, Tom is able to find instances of glory brought about precisely because life is so fettered to the everyday, the past-less, the future-less, the mundane and exhausting. The references here are to transcendence, flying, leaving behind the body, departing the earth, in other words to sky-walking, as Petit did. The ‘act of indelible beauty’ described on the afternoon of 11 September 2001 has been altered only slightly. In 2005 Tom describes ‘indelible moments of grace’, while performing the punishing, demeaning duties of taxi driver. In this way, the *Random Notes* of 2001 are the ur-text for the thoughts of Tom in 2005:

Indelible moments of grace, tiny exaltations, unexpected miracles. Gliding through Times Square at three-thirty in the morning, and all the traffic is gone, and suddenly you’re alone in the center of the world, with neon raining down on you from every corner of the sky. Or pushing the speedometer up past seventy on the Belt Parkway just before dawn and smelling the ocean as it pours in on you through the open window. Or travelling across the Brooklyn Bridge at the very moment a full moon rises into the arch, and that’s all you can see, the bright yellow roundness of the moon, so big that it frightens you, and you forget that you live down here on earth and imagine you’re flying, that the cab has wings and you’re actually flying through space. No book can duplicate those things. I’m talking about real transcendence, Harry. Leaving your body behind you and entering the fullness and thickness of the world.<sup>17</sup>

The vitality and vigour that come from the unmediated initial impulse of the ur-text is critically important to Auster, as I will demonstrate. In 1983 he translated and published fragments and notes by Stephane Mallarmé, which were to form a four-part poem about the death of Mallarmé’s beloved son Anatole at the age

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 29-30.

of eight.<sup>18</sup> The fragments were kept in a red box, Mallarmé's own red notebook. In his explanatory essay about the work of translating them Auster wrote that:

they are no more than notes for a possible work: a long poem in four parts... As they stand now, the notes are a kind of ur-text, the raw data of the poetic process... For here we find a language of immediate contact, a syntax of abrupt, lightning shifts that still manages to maintain a sense, and in their brevity, the sparse presence of their words, we are given a rare and early example of isolated words able to span the enormous mental spaces that lie between them – as if intelligible links could be created by the brute force of each word or phrase, so densely charged that these tiny particles of language could somehow leap out of themselves and catch hold of the succeeding cliff-edge of thought.<sup>19</sup>

I would suggest that the 'ur-text' Auster describes, the 'tiny particles' of language that are 'able to span the enormous mental spaces that lie between them' is precisely what he is attempting to achieve in his *Random Notes* written on 11 September 2001. For that reason, the clumsy quality of the prose need not necessarily be a mark of its failure; Auster's ugly prose is his attempt to find words that 'leap out of themselves and catch hold of the succeeding cliff-edge of thought.'

Auster's own daughter, travelling alone for the first time on the subway beneath the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001 was saved. I would suggest however that there is a connection between Mallarmé's fragments and Auster's own. In his 1982 essay he said that 'The death of a child is the ultimate horror of every parent, an outrage against all we believe we can expect of life, little though it is.'<sup>20</sup> It is clear that in his 'Random Notes' he is thinking about the possible 'outrage' that was so nearly his. And it is for these reasons that his fragmentary phrase 'This then is the break with the past. This is the start of something painfully new' is not the glib aspiration that it might at first appear to be. It is

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<sup>18</sup> Stephane Mallarmé, *A Tomb for Anatole*, trans. Paul Auster (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983).

<sup>19</sup> Auster, 'Mallarmé's Son' in *The Red Notebook*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.



Auster's manifesto for his future artistic endeavour. It is the unwritten 'raw data of the poetic process' that will become his subsequent novels. There is of course a fundamental paradox in what I am suggesting; that Auster is both conditioned by and yet acting independently of the past. The illogicality of the concept is held within the competing words of Auster's post-past, each word dependent upon the other for relative meaning.

As Paul de Man suggested in his essay 'Literary History and Literary Modernity,' 'modernity invests its trust in the power of the present moment as an origin, but discovers that, in severing itself from the past, it has at the same time severed itself from the present.' De Man cites the view of Nietzsche that unlike animals who live in a state of pastlessness, for man 'No matter how far and how swiftly he runs, the chain runs with him.'<sup>21</sup> So it is either possible, as de Man suggests, to 'resort to paradoxical formulations, such as defining the modernity of a literary period as the manner in which it discovers the impossibility of being modern'<sup>22</sup>, or to conceive of a way in which it is possible to accept both states of post and past simultaneously. This, I would suggest, is what Auster does. He signals his dependence on and influence by what went before, his teenage trauma at watching a friend die, at the same time as saying that a new trauma, familiar to him as a latent sensation, will determine his future modes of thought and action.

As I have suggested, the events of 9/11, about which Auster said 'I'm not over it yet, and I don't think I ever will be', mark a fundamental and pivotal moment in his writing, but the notion of the Miltonian before and after is a concept that he first wrote about in the 1980s. In *City of Glass*, which forms part of *The New York Trilogy*, a sense is introduced of a *modus vivendi* before tragedy, and an altered state of living afterwards:

In *Paradise Lost*, for example, each key word has two meanings – one before the fall and one after the fall. To illustrate his point, Stillman

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<sup>21</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historien für das Leben', *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtung II*, in Karl Schlechta, ed., *Werke I* (Munich: C. Hanser, 1954), p. 211.

<sup>22</sup> Paul de Man, 'Literary History and Literary Modernity', *Daedalus*, vol. 99, no. 2, *Theory in Humanistic Studies* (Spring 1970), pp. 384-404, p. 385.

isolated several of those words – sinister, serpentine, delicious – and showed how their prelapsarian use was free of moral connotations, whereas their use after the fall was shaded, ambiguous, informed by a knowledge of evil.... Names became detached from things; words devolved into a collection of arbitrary signs; language had been severed from God. The story of the Garden, therefore, not only records the fall of man, but the fall of language.<sup>23</sup>

The before and the after of a traumatic event is a scenario he revisited in his later novel *Leviathan*. His character Ben Sachs does not suffer so much a metaphorical fall from grace, as a real one. On that most symbolically weighty of days, 4 July 1986, Independence Day and the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, he falls off a fire escape at a party. (*Leviathan* is dedicated to Don DeLillo, who was to experiment so memorably with a falling man more than a decade later):

First I realized that I was falling, and then I realized that I was dead. I don't mean that I sensed I was going to die, I mean that I was already dead. I was a dead man falling through the air, and even though I was technically still alive I was dead, as dead as a man who's been buried in his grave.<sup>24</sup>

Auster presented this metaphorical and literal fall as pivotal to Sachs' life, defining as it did a before and an after:

His body mended, but he was never the same after that. In those few seconds before he hit the ground, it was as if Sachs lost everything. His entire life flew past in midair, and from that moment until his death four years later, he never put it back together again.<sup>25</sup>

Austrian characters who do not manage to shed their pasts need to be

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Auster, 'City of Glass', *The New York Trilogy* (1985; London: Faber & Faber, 1987), p. 43.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Auster, *Leviathan* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992) p. 117. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

rescued from them. At the end of *The Locked Room*, the story that formed part of *The New York Trilogy*, the narrator stands in a railway station tearing out the pages of a red notebook belonging to his former friend, the writer Fanshawe. Fanshawe has pursued the narrator who in turn pursued him. The narrator has rescued himself and in turn Fanshawe's first wife Sophie must be rescued too:

By publishing Fanshawe's work, by devoting herself to a man who was no longer there, she would be forced to live in the past, and whatever future she might want to build for herself would be tainted by the role she had to play: the official widow, the dead writer's muse, the beautiful heroine in a tragic story. No one wants to be part of a fiction, and even less so if that fiction is real.<sup>26</sup>

It is worth noting *en passant* that a red notebook appears many times in Auster's fiction and *The Red Notebook* is the title of his own collection of thoughts and ideas, including the essay 'Why Write?' As *The Locked Room* concludes Fanshawe appears to be subsuming the narrator's own life. It is only by destroying Fanshawe's red book that the narrator is able to reclaim his own existence. In an additional literary flourish, as Malcolm Bradbury pointed out, Fanshawe is the name of an 'early fantastic novel' by Nathaniel Hawthorne<sup>27</sup>, a writer cited many times in Paul Auster's work. Tom's fumbling attempt to describe to Nathan (another variation on Nathaniel) and to his employer Harry those moments of transcendence, the entry into the 'fullness and thickness of the world' find new and potent force in Harry's notion of 'The Hotel Existence'. Essentially Harry's existentialist longing is for a place where anyone can go and start to live a new life 'inside your dreams'. The new existence, lived within a dream, is another variation on Auster's literary hyperparallelisms, as I will assess in the second part of this chapter. It is where alternative trajectories to those endured in reality can be explored.

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<sup>26</sup> Paul Auster, 'The Locked Room', *The New York Trilogy* (1985; London: Faber & Faber, 1987), pp. 226-227.

<sup>27</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel*, (1983; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 259.

## Part Two: *The Brooklyn Follies* and *Man in the Dark*: Auster's literary hyperparallelisms

Stories happen only to those who are able to tell them, someone once said<sup>28</sup>

Paul Auster

Auster has said many times that his favourite work of literature is Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Tom's search for the post-past is oddly picaresque in that it is arguably linear, albeit in a postmodern style; so too is he the servant of several masters such as Harry and ultimately his wife. To that extent his quest is redolent of Don Quixote's. *The Brooklyn Follies* is oddly the most comic in tone of all Auster's novels too, even though it is the only one to focus explicitly on the events of 9/11. The title itself points to the curious extravagant frivolity of Stephen Sondheim's eponymous musical, with its existential showstopper of a number *I'm Still Here*:

I've run the gamut, A to Z  
Three cheers and dammit, C'est la vie  
I got through all of last year, and I'm here  
Lord knows, at least I was there, and I'm here  
Look who's here, I'm still here<sup>29</sup>

It is Tom, Nathan and Harry's theme too (the characters who could so easily have had the everyman names of Tom, *Dick* and Harry but for Auster's decision to include the Nathan/Nathaniel Hawthorne reference), and each of them is driven by variations on a desire to celebrate the essential pointlessness of life's quest. 'The Hotel Existence', cited by Harry, is the perfect endgame on which to focus that quest. This section of the novel is written in dramatic dialogue; in other words it is as solidly set in the present tense as it is possible to be, and comes complete with stage directions:

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<sup>28</sup> Auster, *The Locked Room*, p. 222.

<sup>29</sup> Lyrics from Stephen Sondheim's 'I'm Still Here', *Follies* (1971; Bronxville, NY: PS Classics, 2011).

HARRY (closing his eyes; pressing his forefingers against his temples): It's all coming back to me now. The Hotel Existence. I was just ten years old, but I can still remember the exact moment when the idea occurred to me, the exact moment when I found the name. It was a Sunday afternoon during the war. The radio was on, and I was sitting in the living room of our house in Buffalo with a copy of Life magazine, looking at pictures of the American troops in France. I had never been inside a hotel, but I had walked past enough of them on my trips downtown with my mother to know that they were special places, fortresses that protected you from the squalor and meanness of everyday life... A hotel represented the promise of a better world, a place that was more than just a place, but an opportunity, a chance to live inside your dreams.

NATHAN: That explains the hotel part. Where did you find the word existence?

HARRY: I heard it on the radio that Sunday afternoon. I was only half listening to the program, but someone was talking about human existence, and I liked the way it sounded. The laws of existence, the voice said, and the perils we must face in the course of our existence. Existence was bigger than just life. It was everyone's life all together, and even if you lived in Buffalo, New York, and had never been more than ten miles from home, you were part of the puzzle, too. It didn't matter how small your life was.<sup>30</sup>

Harry's notion of 'The Hotel Existence' is never fulfilled, indeed it is suggested that he always knew that it would not be. He dies in acute pain and distress, running after the taxi in which his traitorous, blackmailing lover and accomplice are escaping. But Harry leaves behind him the means by which Tom can find his own Hotel Existence; a large bequest in Harry's will allows Tom to buy an airy, light-filled apartment. To that extent it is possible to argue that Tom finds his post-past, with the acquisition of his new apartment, his new wife and his

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<sup>30</sup> Auster, *The Brooklyn Follies*, pp. 100-101.

soon-to-be-born child. They are the perfect accoutrements with which to soldier on in his Quixote-like mission. But I would suggest that there are reasons to suppose that Tom does not find a happy post-past, but merely a temporary, transitory pre-future.

*The Brooklyn Follies* ends as Nathan leaves hospital after suffering a suspected heart attack. For twenty-four hours he has been lying in a hospital bed, 'alone with my fear and morbid imagination as my blood gradually told the story of what had or hadn't happened to me.' As his secular dark night of the soul grinds on, three fellow patients appear and disappear one by one: Dickensian ghosts of past, present and yet-to-come, dressed in hospital gowns. First an Egyptian taxi driver, then a thirty-nine year old roofer and finally a seventy-eight year old retired carpenter. We assume that the first dies before the night is over and the second is transferred to the cardiac unit because it's 'pretty serious.' Nathan comes to view the bed next to him as 'haunted by some mysterious form of erasure, blotting out the men who had lain on it and ushering them into a realm of darkness and oblivion.'<sup>31</sup>

It is while thinking about the bare bed's sinister role as the conduit for death that Nathan has an epiphany, what he calls 'the single most important idea I had ever had.' His idea is that he should form a company called 'Bios Unlimited', a publishing house that will create books that resurrect the forgotten people in words, 'to rescue the stories and facts and documents before they disappeared – and shape them into a continuous narrative, the narrative of a life.'<sup>32</sup> It is not life insurance, the kind of work practiced by Nathan in his former life, but what he thinks of as 'biography insurance'.

Nathan is discharged from hospital, so suffused with joy to be alive that he says he wants to scream:

It was eight o'clock when I stepped out onto the street, eight o'clock on the morning of September 11, 2001 – just forty-six minutes before the first plane crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Just

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<sup>31</sup> Auster, *The Brooklyn Follies*, p. 300.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 301.

two hours after that, the smoke of three thousand incinerated bodies would drift over toward Brooklyn and come pouring down on us in a white cloud of ashes and death.

But for now it was still eight o'clock, and as I walked along the avenue under that brilliant blue sky, I was happy, my friends, as happy as any man who had ever lived.<sup>33</sup>

These are the dying moments before the 'break with the past', and the reader knows it. No Austerian plot trickery or coincidental contrivance is possible now that a new parallelism exists: Nathan's ignorance of what will happen in forty-six minutes matched by the reader's twin awareness of his ignorance and anticipation of the catastrophe. The reader, it could be argued, has been placed by Auster in a state of pre-future. Paul de Man's definition of the paradoxical notion of 'defining the modernity of a literary period as the manner in which it discovers the impossibility of being modern' comes to mind, for the reader certainly if not the imaginary characters. No-one can avoid what is to happen in forty-six minutes time, other of course than the characters who have yet to be invented but who will appear in the later novel *Man in the Dark*, which I will analyze later in this chapter.

If we go back to an earlier stage of *The Brooklyn Follies*, before Harry's death and before Tom meets Honey Chowder, the woman who will be his wife, this is what we find:

if we hadn't made that decision to get off the highway at Brattleboro and follow our noses to Route 30, many of the events in this book never would have taken place. I am thinking especially of Tom when I say that. Both Lucy and I profited from the decision as well, but for Tom, the long-suffering hero of these Brooklyn Follies, it was probably the most important decision of his life... Like Kafka's doll, he thought he was simply looking for a change of scenery, but because he left one road and

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 303-304.

took another, Fortune unexpectedly reached out her arms to him and carried our boy into a different world.<sup>34</sup>

It is made very clear that *The Brooklyn Follies* is Tom's book; he is, after all, 'the long-suffering hero of these Brooklyn Follies' and, like Kafka's doll, he is changed by his experiences and choices. It is my view that Auster is signalling that this book, the one we are reading, is one of the 'biography insurance' policies that Nathan was planning on that bright September morning. Tom is one of those who will die in Auster's version of the terrible events of 9/11.

To support my view that Paul Auster intended that Tom should not have a future, but merely what I am terming a *pre-future* (i.e. a limited phase in which the future is envisaged but not experienced or in which a Freudian forwardsness is anticipated but not delivered), I would point to Auster's tradition of establishing a pattern of including books within his books, taking on either the title or the contents of work that his characters are writing or have read. In *Leviathan*, Peter Aaron names the book that we are reading after the book that his dead friend Ben Sachs was writing. 'To mark what will never exist, I have given my book the same title that Sachs was planning to use for his: *Leviathan*.'<sup>35</sup> It is the book that we have been reading, but it is also the book that Aaron has written and hands to the FBI agent to explain what Sachs has done. In Auster/Aaron's words, a book is a means by which something can be marked that 'will never exist.' And the dead can be granted a new existence by the mere fact of their story being told in a book. In *City of Glass*, the slowly unravelling Quinn writes everything down in his red notebook, the same name Auster gave to his 1995 collection of interviews and essays in which he reflects upon his own work. So there is consistent evidence to support my view that if *The Brooklyn Follies* is the book of Tom's life, if he is 'the long-suffering hero of these Brooklyn Follies', it can be extrapolated that it is Auster's intention that *The Brooklyn Follies* is the story of someone no longer living, in other words Nathan's first biography of the 'forgotten people', the invisible people whose lives are not mourned publicly. *The Brooklyn Follies* is Paul Auster's fictional

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>35</sup> Auster, *Leviathan*, p. 142.



'portrait of grief' for solid, stolid Tom Wood by his mercurial, unpredictable, unreliable uncle, Nathan Glass.

*Man in the Dark*, Auster's 2008 novel, is set in a fictional future or a parallel present, but most decidedly not the past. It is, as I have suggested, Titus' book, the story of a young man kidnapped in Iraq and beheaded by his captors. Titus, like Tom, had wanted to be a writer. Both discovered that they did not have the ability to do it. *Man in the Dark* is the book of the man who could not write his own, just as *The Brooklyn Follies* is. In *Man in the Dark*'s two hyperparallel worlds there are two deaths, each of the protagonist. Owen Brick, the invention of Auster's similarly invented August Brill, is 'the protagonist of tonight's story.'<sup>36</sup> Brick is killed by Federal troops who have gathered in the street with machine guns:

The first bullet hits him in the leg, and he falls down, clutching the wound as blood spurts onto his fingers. Before he can inspect the damage and see how badly he is hurt, a second bullet goes straight through his right eye and out the back of his head. And that is the end of Owen Brick, who leaves the world in silence with no chance to say a last word or think a last thought.<sup>37</sup>

It is easy to assume that August Brill is the hyperparallel protagonist twinned with Owen Brick. It is he, after all, who invents Brill as he lies, man in the dark, unable to sleep. But there is an overarching protagonist, Titus, the former boyfriend of Brill's granddaughter Katya. Titus, whose death is announced at the beginning of the novel and whose slaughter is enacted at the end, is the original man in the dark, not insomniac Brill. Titus is the man who has been forced into the dark; 'a hood has been placed over his head.' Titus is the eponymous hero of this novel and Titus, like Brick, is murdered. Auster described the inspiration for this novel as:

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<sup>36</sup> Paul, Auster, *Man in the Dark* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), p. 102. Subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

the 2000 election which was an outrage to me. I felt so frustrated and disgusted and outraged and angry and depressed about what happened because Al Gore won the election. He was voted President of the United States and through political and legal manoeuvrings the Republicans stole it from him and I've had this eerie sense for the past 8 years that we hopped off the tracks of reality.<sup>38</sup>

It is precisely the inspiration found by Richard Ford when he wrote the novel *The Lay of the Land*; indeed he used a similar phrase to define the times: 'the Republicans stole the government'<sup>39</sup>. Ford used the events both to define a hiatus, a stalled period in history, a lacuna, a time without meaning and also as territory in which he could take refuge as a writer. Auster, however, used it very differently. His response is to mine that period in America's history for its richness, rather than its paucity. From that richness he creates not one world, but two; it becomes a fictional parallel time set in contradistinction to its real-world counterpart. Lou Frisk, who demands of Owen Brick that he murder the creator of his story August Brill, defines that parallel world:

There's no single reality, Corporal. There are many realities. There's no single world. There are many worlds, and they all run parallel to one another, worlds and anti-worlds, worlds and shadow-worlds, and each world is dreamed or imagined or written by someone in another world. Each world is the creation of a mind.<sup>40</sup>

Lou Frisk's words are startlingly similar to those expressed by the unnamed aide to George W. Bush in 2004, in one of the keynotes of this study, when he claimed that superpowers are entitled to invent their own realities. Indeed, I would suggest that these are the words that Auster is referencing in his novel:

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<sup>38</sup> Auster interviewed by George Miller,  
<[http://www.faber.co.uk/site-media/audio-snippets/auster\\_interview.mp3](http://www.faber.co.uk/site-media/audio-snippets/auster_interview.mp3)>

<sup>39</sup> Richard Ford interviewed by Chas Bowie, *Portland Mercury*, 19 October 2006.  
<<http://www.portlandmercury.com/portland/richard-ford-interview/Content?oid=73912>> [accessed 16 May 2013].

<sup>40</sup> Auster, *Man in the Dark*, pp. 68-69.

That's not the way the world really works anymore... We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors...and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.<sup>41</sup>

The unnamed aide was assumed to be Karl Rove. Lou Frisk/Karl Rove: interchangeable aggressively mono-syllabled names, interchangeable grandiloquent views. Karl Rove it was who notoriously challenged reality in 2003 by arranging for President Bush to be deposited on an aircraft carrier, with an outrageously mendacious banner declaring 'Mission Accomplished' behind his head. As I outlined in Chapter 1, the attempts to invent new realities were just as ambitious in real-life America as they ever were or are in Auster's creative mind. To construct his parallel world, Auster has 72-year-old writer August Brill imagine a time when America is at war with itself, which, in the context of America's formative history, is not such a stretch after all. In this twin world, twenty-something Owen Brick, a professional magician, is charged with the task of killing his creator Brill.

It should be stressed that Auster believed that America really was at war with itself, although it was a war of ideology. This, in other words, is no idle exercise in the fantastical. Auster suggested that his vision of a parallel world stemmed from his sense that America was living two distinct lives. To that extent Auster is both unhooking the USA from its past as well as imagining a different present and future:

We've been living in a parallel world. The world we asked for is one in which Al Gore is now finishing his second term, the US never invaded Iraq and possibly 9/11 never happened either. And so this sense of living in a real unreal world inspired me to make this story and tell it through

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<sup>41</sup> Ron Suskind, 'Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush', *New York Times Magazine*, 17 October 2004. At the time the words of an unnamed aide to George W Bush, but later attributed to Karl Rove.

<[http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/17BUSH.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/17BUSH.html?_r=0)>  
[accessed 26 March 2013].

Brill because in a sense of course it's an exaggeration. I'm not predicting a real civil war in the US but I do think we are in a civil war of a kind. Not with bombs and bullets but with words and ideas. And the country is very divided and the two halves are not able to speak to each other anymore. There's no common language there; no discourse available anymore.<sup>42</sup>

Explicitly, there is no sense of a nation with a past here; Auster is dealing in Tom's 'post-past'. And since this is Titus' book, as *The Brooklyn Follies* was Tom's book, all roads lead to the section in the novel when Titus is slaughtered, forever 'live' on video. In describing the final, horrific hours of Titus, Auster reverts entirely to the present tense. The language is brutal and explicit:

When the head is finally severed from the body, the executioner lets the hatchet fall to the floor. The other man removes the hood from Titus's head, and then a third man takes hold of Titus's long red hair and carries the head closer to the camera. Blood is dripping everywhere. Titus is no longer quite human. He has become the idea of a person, a person and not a person, a dead bleeding thing: *une nature morte*.

The man holding the head backs away from the camera, and a fourth man approaches with a knife. One by one, working with great speed and precision, he stabs out the boy's eyes.

The camera rolls for a few more seconds, and then the screen goes black.

Impossible to know how long it has lasted. Fifteen minutes. A thousand years.<sup>43</sup>

It is worth noting that Auster uses the *nature morte/natura morta* motif deployed by DeLillo in *Falling Man* to signify arrested time, as well as the 'head as symbol of the whole' trope that I will go on to discuss in greater detail in Chapter 4. It is

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<sup>42</sup> Auster interviewed by George Miller,  
<[http://www.faber.co.uk/site-media/audio-snippets/auster\\_interview.mp3](http://www.faber.co.uk/site-media/audio-snippets/auster_interview.mp3)>

<sup>43</sup> Auster, *Man in the Dark*, p. 176.

useful to refer back to Auster's 1983 essay on Mallarmé's son at this point. In it, Auster likens the effect upon him of reading the fragments of grief written by Mallarmé to seeing the final portrait painted by Rembrandt of his son, who was of course called Titus:

Bearing in mind the radiant and adoring series of canvasses the artist made of the boy throughout his childhood, it is almost impossible for us to look at that last painting: the dying Titus, barely twenty years old, his face so ravaged by disease that he looks like an old man. It is important to imagine what Rembrandt must have felt as he painted that portrait; to imagine him staring into the face of his dying son and being able to keep his hand steady enough to put what he saw onto the canvas. If fully imagined, the act becomes unthinkable.<sup>44</sup>

Auster's Titus is introduced at the beginning of *Man in the Dark* in just those terms. Once again, Auster finds recourse in an earlier ur-text and reinvents in literary form:

His parents named him after Rembrandt's son, the little boy of the paintings, the golden-haired child in the red hat, the daydreaming pupil puzzling over his lessons, the little boy who turned into a young man ravaged by illness and who died in his twenties, just as Katya's Titus did. It's a doomed name, a name that should be banned from circulation forever. I think about Titus's death often, the horrifying story of that death, the images of that death, the pulverizing consequences of that death on my grieving granddaughter but I don't want to go there now, I can't go there now...

In forcing us to confront the video of Titus being butchered, sliced and dehumanized, Auster is reinventing the ordeal that he believes Rembrandt must have endured as he painted his dying son; his 'being able to keep his hand steady enough to put what he saw onto the canvas.'

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<sup>44</sup> Auster, *Mallarmé's Son*, p. 86.

In his use of extreme violence, his decision to have Titus' murderers stab out his eyes, Auster alludes to classical literature and Shakespearian tragedy, as well as his own numerous references over many years to eye injuries suffered by baseball stars. Richard Ford also used the image of catastrophic damage done to the eyes in baseball accidents in his *Sportswriter* trilogy and in Chapter 4 I will analyze the use of the injured eye in novels by Kamila Shamsie and Nadeem Aslam. *Man in the Dark* extracts the motif of damage done to the eyes from its previously all-American sporting past and places it firmly in the territory of the modern-day terrorist. These injuries are no longer accidental; they are more shocking for being deliberate. *Man in the Dark* is Auster's most explicitly violent novel. Again, like Nadeem Aslam, Auster exploits the traditional Afghani contest of 'buzkashi', polo with a goat carcass, to shockingly violent effect. In Aslam's rendition, Benedikt, the former Soviet soldier, is torn limb from limb:

When the rifle shot comes he thinks they have fired into him, but no, he hasn't been shot, and now a dozen hands grab onto his limbs and hair and clothing and he feels himself being lifted unevenly off the ground.<sup>45</sup>

In *Man in the Dark*, Auster deploys the same hideous game, albeit unnamed, to bring about the death of a beautiful, left wing 'troublemaker' in the Second World War. She was subjected to public execution because she dared disobey the guards:

Jean-Luc couldn't look at us when he spoke the words. He turned his head away and looked out the window, as if the execution were taking place just outside the restaurant, and in a quiet voice suddenly filled with emotion, he said: She was drawn and quartered. With long chains attached to both her wrists and both her ankles, she was led into the yard, made to stand at attention as the chains were attached to four jeeps pointing in four different directions, and then the commandant gave the order for the drivers to start their engines. According to the man at

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<sup>45</sup> Nadeem Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), p. 366.

the next table, the woman didn't cry out, didn't make a sound as one limb after another was pulled off her body.<sup>46</sup>

As in the death of Titus, it seems important to Auster to point out that the woman 'didn't make a sound.' Neither Titus nor the woman protest or plead as they are publicly slaughtered. They come mutely to death. Perhaps, as I will suggest in the following chapter with reference to Nadeem Aslam, Auster was reluctant to indulge in the descriptions of pain that must surely have resulted from the violent scenes he was describing. Surprisingly, *Man in the Dark* ends on an oddly optimistic note, as Brill and his daughter Miriam smile together about the one line of poetry written by Rose Hawthorne that they think was any good: 'As the weird world rolls on.' In Austerian terms the fact that the world keeps muddling along could be regarded as a victory in itself. But where *Man in the Dark* ends in its oddly jaunty way, *Sunset Park* picks up, in altogether bleaker, more introverted and nihilistic style. In Part Three I will explain how the temporal trajectory developed by Auster from the post-past of *The Brooklyn Follies* and the hyperparallel pre-future of the *Man in the Dark*, culminates in the futureless now of *Sunset Park*.

### Part Three: *Sunset Park*, silence and the futureless now

To find a form that accommodates the mess,  
that is the task of the artist now<sup>47</sup>

Samuel Beckett

*Sunset Park*, Auster's 2010 novel, is set in the toxic climate of sub-prime mortgage crises, evoking thoughts of refugees and the homeless. The only thriving business is in 'trashing out'; the clearing out of abandoned homes on

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<sup>46</sup> Auster, *Man in the Dark*, p.121.

<sup>47</sup> Tom F. Driver, 'Beckett by the Madeleine', *Columbia University Forum*, IV (Summer, 1961), p. 505.

the orders of local banks who now own the buildings and subcontract their hideously misnamed 'home preservation' services. It is another interregnum, this time between the election of Barack Obama and his inauguration. It is a world of negatives where fates are determined by things not done. Auster's character, the writer Renzo, is 'toying with' the idea of writing an essay about 'the things that don't happen, the lives not lived, the wars not fought, the shadow worlds that run parallel to the world we take to be the real world, the not-said and the not-done, the not-remembered.'<sup>48</sup>

In this post-apocalyptic landscape, Miles Heller, his name as so often in Auster's work an extended embodiment of his predicament and state of mind, is one of those employed to 'trash out'. He finds himself compelled to document the detritus, to record the abandoned things on camera. His work is the bleak, dark postmodern version of Nathan Glass's nobler endeavour to produce benign biographical memorials of the forgotten dead. Miles Heller's work is to document the failure, not of the accidentally forgotten but of the wilfully vanished:

The absent people have all fled in haste, in shame, in confusion, and it is certain that wherever they are living now (if they have found a place to live and are not camped out in the streets) their new dwellings are smaller than the houses they have lost. Each house is a story of failure – of bankruptcy and default, of debt and foreclosure – and he has taken it upon himself to document the last, lingering traces of those scattered lives in order to prove that the vanished families were once here, that the ghosts of people he will never see and never know are still present in the discarded things strewn about their empty houses.<sup>49</sup>

Mired as he is in other people's abandoned things, Heller tries to ration his own possessions, a job he is successful at apart from when it comes to limiting his books: 'the only luxury he allows himself is buying books, paperback books, mostly novels, American novels, British novels, foreign novels in translation, but

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<sup>48</sup> Paul Auster, *Sunset Park* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), p. 153. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>49</sup> Auster, *Sunset Park*, p. 3.



in the end books are not luxuries so much as necessities and reading is an addiction he has no wish to be cured of.’<sup>50</sup> Miles’ assertion that books are ‘necessities’ resonates with Auster’s own admission in the past that, for him, writing is ‘no longer an act of free will for me; it’s a matter of survival’<sup>51</sup>. It is no accident that Miles meets his girlfriend Pilar in the park, not because they are introduced to each other but because both of them are reading copies of *The Great Gatsby*. Books are a form of sign language for a character who is unwilling or unable to fill the silence with speech. As Sarah Churchwell notes, Fitzgerald’s novel is ‘so rich and unexpected, so slight and so unfathomable, so much a story of its moment and yet so much a story of ours. It is a reckoning of the nation’s hope and its failures...’<sup>52</sup> There can be no doubt that Miles sees only its failures.

Miles’ obsessive acquisition of books is matched by a neurotic acquisition of photographs. As he clears rubbish from ‘orphaned homes’, Miles meticulously documents everything he finds on camera. As the novel opens he calculates that he has already amassed thousands of these pictures:

He has no idea why he feels compelled to take these pictures. He understands that it is an empty pursuit, of no possible benefit to anyone, and yet each time he walks into a house, he senses that the things are calling out to him, speaking to him in the voices of the people who are no longer there, asking him to be looked at one last time before they are carted away.

It is an idea reminiscent of the objectification relentlessly and endlessly pursued by the Italian still-life artist Giorgio Morandi, detailed in the last chapter. Morandi’s obsessive assembly and reassembly of *la natura morta* or dead nature was transfigured by Don DeLillo into an objectification of the Twin Towers themselves, so that, in DeLillo’s imagination, the fallen towers resemble

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<sup>50</sup> Auster, *Sunset Park*, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> James Campbell, ‘The mighty Quinn’, *Guardian*, 12 November 2005 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/nov/12/fiction.shopping>> [accessed 6 May 2013].

<sup>52</sup> Sarah Churchwell, *Careless People: Murder, Mayhem and the Invention of ‘The Great Gatsby’* (London: Virago Press, 2013), p. 371.

two of Morandi's paintings. In Auster's hands however Miles' objectification of people's failure takes on a far darker tone, literally a negative image. Where DeLillo represents objects as missing towers, Auster represents objects as spaces, gaps, 'people who are no longer there.' As I will explore at the end of this chapter, the idea of missing objects and empty space prefigures Auster's words at the conclusion of his memoir *Winter Journal*, when, as he walks across Brooklyn Bridge he 'sees' empty spaces and hears voices that are no longer there.

Miles Heller, so driven by the desire to own books and to read, finds himself fatally uncommunicative. For a character both silent and oddly passive, it is important to note that Auster ensures that major decisions and actions are determined by violence, often committed by him. Miles is an intellectual and has received the best education and yet he is curiously lacking in vocabulary. He amasses not words but pictures of the 'abandoned things'. He does not make decisions for considered reasons, but is forced to act as violent deeds alter his circumstances. Miles has left home because he feels responsible for the death of his stepbrother, killed when Miles pushes him into the road. He leaves Florida when he is assaulted and threatened by his girlfriend's family:

the choice was made for him by a large fist that knocked him down and commanded him to run from Florida to a place called Sunset Park. Just another roll of the dice, then, another lottery pick scooped out of the black metal urn, another fluke in a world of flukes and endless mayhem.<sup>53</sup>

Finally and decisively he destroys his chance to reinvent himself when he punches a policeman in the jaw. Once again, the man who loves to read cannot find words to communicate. There are connections to be drawn here between Miles and Herman Melville's Billy Budd; Miles, ostensibly and apparently a 'good' man, is unable to demonstrate that goodness. At the same time, in the absence of a willingness or ability to explain himself verbally, he is fatally drawn to catastrophic acts of demonstrative violence.

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<sup>53</sup> Auster, *Sunset Park*, pp. 55-56.

Miles' missing vocabulary is territory that Auster has explored before. In *The Brooklyn Follies*, Nathan's niece's young daughter Lucy refuses to speak when she arrives in New York. But Lucy's silence is a powerful silence. It allows her to exert control over those around her who cajole and exhort her to speak. But by the time Auster came to write *Sunset Park* Miles' failure to speak has become a passive and debilitating silence. The lack of vocabulary is a conundrum that other writers have faced in attempting to write about 9/11 and twenty-first-century catastrophe. The French writer Frédéric Beigbeder in his 9/11 novel *Windows on the World*, wrestled with the difficulty of finding a verb to use for 'parking a plane in a building.' As noted by Kristiaan Versluys<sup>54</sup>, his character finally comes up with a play on the French word 'atterrissage' which means to crash-land, and manipulates it to include the vowels o and u instead of e so that 'atterrissage' becomes 'attourrissage', trapping within it the French word for tower. In a trans-lingual reflection on the limitations of vocabulary, in the French edition Beigbeder writes:

'Nous espérons que vous avez fait un agréable voyage en compagnie d'Air France et regrettons de ne plus jamais vous revoir sur nos lignes, ni ailleurs. Préparez-vous à l'attourrissage.'<sup>55</sup>

But in the English edition, Beigbeder satisfies himself with a truncated version of the text and makes no play on the imagined verb to 'park a plane in a building.' 'Preparez-vous a l'attourrissage' is simply missing from the translation:

'We hope you've enjoyed your flight with Air France and regret that we will not have the pleasure of seeing you on our airlines, or indeed anywhere else, again.'<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Kristiaan Versluys, *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 142.

<sup>55</sup> Frédéric Beigbeder, *Windows on the World*, French edition (Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2003), p. 8 h.58.

<sup>56</sup> Frédéric Beigbeder, *Windows on the World*, English edition, trans. Frank Wynne (London: Harper Perennial, 2005) p. 8 h.58.

It is perhaps Auster's ability or at least willingness to try to find the words that so displeased the critic James Wood. Viewed in this light, the piercing criticism he levelled at Auster that there was 'not enough silence, alas' becomes a little petulant. His remonstrance that others, as it were, do silence better, begins to sound oddly competitive:

The classic formulations of postmodernism, by philosophers and theorists like Maurice Blanchot and Ihab Hassan, emphasize the way that contemporary language abuts silence. For Blanchot, as indeed for Beckett, language is always announcing its invalidity. Texts stutter and fragment, shred themselves around a void. Perhaps the strangest element of Auster's reputation as an American postmodernist is that his language never registers this kind of absence at the level of the sentence. The void is all too speakable in Auster's work.<sup>57</sup>

In other words, Wood suggests that Auster's silence is the void of the inadequate writer rather than the postmodernist referencer of language's own inadequacies. I am not convinced that Wood has made his case here. Auster himself has pointed to the imperative to write about the small in response to the large, such as 9/11 and, in the case of *Leviathan* has made the connection between the small *word* and silence in the figure of Peter Aaron, the man who 'anguishes and struggles over each sentence' and for whom '...the smallest word is surrounded by acres of silence.' I would suggest that this is what Auster is reaching for in his characters' recourse to muteness; that, and focusing on the small details, gestures and words. Speaking in 2012, Auster defined explicitly how the artist must respond to 9/11:

he must continue to do his work... Making up stories, fictions, whether films or novels or narrative poems, it's all about the sanctity of the individual, which is what our democracies are supposedly all about, upholding the rights of the individual. And if we don't have people chronicling the lives of the individuals out there, then we become monolithic states. So therefore the job of the writer is to think small, pay

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<sup>57</sup> Wood, 'Shallow Graves'.

attention and communicate what's out there, what people are doing.<sup>58</sup>

To 'think small' is Auster's drive. That is not to say that Auster registers silence by heaping up yet more words around it. And in any event, a lack of words has not always been seen as a limitation in Auster's work. *The Brooklyn Follies'* Lucy is of course a case in point. Silence at times appears to express a sense of solidarity with others, of shared endeavour and of corporate suffering. Indeed in an interview included in *The Red Notebook* and dated 1989-90 he stated that solitude is explicitly not a state of misery:

solitude is a rather complex term for me; it's not just a synonym for loneliness or isolation. Most people tend to think of solitude as a rather gloomy idea, but I don't attach any negative connotations to it. It's a simple fact, one of the conditions of being human, and even if we're surrounded by others we essentially live our lives alone: real life takes place inside us.<sup>59</sup>

In the notes Auster wrote on 11 September 2001, he slightly perversely included a reflection on the passengers of a subway train. He described men with briefcases, women with Bibles, children with textbooks, pan-handlers, deaf-mutes and silent men. And then the train stops:

The noise of the train, the speed of the train. The incomprehensible static that pours through the loudspeaker at each stop. The lurches, the sudden losses of balance, the impact of strangers crashing into one another. The delicate, altogether civilized art of minding one's own business.

And then, never for any apparent reason, the lights go out, the fans stop whirring and everyone sits in silence, waiting for the train to start moving

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<sup>58</sup> Paul Auster interviewed by David Daley, Salon, 19 August 2012, <[http://www.salon.com/2012/08/19/paul\\_auster\\_i\\_think\\_of\\_the\\_right\\_wing\\_republicans\\_as\\_jihadists/](http://www.salon.com/2012/08/19/paul_auster_i_think_of_the_right_wing_republicans_as_jihadists/)> [accessed 26 February 2013].

<sup>59</sup> Paul Auster interviewed by Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, *The Red Notebook*, p. 142.

again. Never a word from anyone. Rarely even a sigh. My fellow New Yorkers sit in the dark, waiting with the patience of angels.<sup>60</sup>

There is something convivial, enduring, endlessly patient about this collegiate solitude. New Yorkers are not renowned for either patience or angelic qualities, and yet they are defined here in these quasi-religious terms and their shared experience is comforting. But by the time Auster came to write *Sunset Park*, the notion of shared solitude expressed in that 1989 interview and reiterated on 11 September 2001, appeared to have evaporated. Solitude no longer appears to have its concomitant quality of solidarity.

*Man in the Dark* opens with August Brill's invented character Owen Brick trapped alone in a large hole, as isolated a place as it is possible to find. But Brick is released from his hole by the intervention of another character and Brick is reunited with the world. *Man in the Dark*'s Beckettian experiment is merely a rehearsal for the figurative hole in which *Sunset Park*'s Miles Heller has tacitly agreed to be placed. His surrender is set against the backdrop of his actress mother's preparations to take on the stage role of Winnie, in Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*. So while Owen Brick is freed from his hole, Mary-Lee playing the part of Winnie begins Act I buried up to her waist and buried up to her neck in Act II. The world of *Happy Days*, and implicitly its similarly perkily-named counterpart *Sunset Park* is, Auster writes, 'a world without darkness, a world of hot, unending light, a sort of purgatory, perhaps, a post-human wilderness of ever-diminishing possibilities, ever-diminishing movement...'<sup>61</sup>

This is, of course, a description of *Sunset Park* itself, with its tragically mismatched name so full of promise, and its tragically mismatched occupants. So too is it a description of the novel's other wilderness, the savage purgatory of Florida with its 'hot, unending light' and its orphaned houses.

*Sunset Park* concludes with Miles' thoughts about the soldier he has seen in a film, a soldier with missing hands unable to undress himself or go to bed without help. The missing, damaged eyes so familiar as a motif throughout Auster's work have become missing hands. Miles' isolation is made ever more acute by

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<sup>60</sup> Auster, 'Random Notes', *110 Stories*, p. 36.

<sup>61</sup> Auster, *Sunset Park*, p. 188.

his thought that condemned to solitude as he is, it is a loneliness that requires the assistance of other people to allow him to live. This is absolute abandonment, not solitude with its calming, cheering, consoling spoonful of solidarity as experienced on Auster's subway train in 2001. And as Miles reflects on that absolute desolation, the two missing hands become missing buildings, the missing buildings become two, which in turn become the Twin Towers:

with one punch he has destroyed everything, they will never have their life together in New York, there is no future for them anymore, no hope for them anymore, and even if he runs away to Florida to be with her now, there will be no hope for them, and even if he stays in New York to fight it out in court, there will be no hope for them, he has let his father down, let Pilar down, let everyone down, and as the car travels across the Brooklyn Bridge and he looks at the immense buildings on the other side of the East River, he thinks about the missing buildings, the collapsed and burning buildings that no longer exist, the missing buildings and the missing hands, and he wonders if it is worth hoping for a future when there is no future, and from now on, he tells himself, he will stop hoping for anything and live only for now, this moment, this passing moment, the now that is here and then not here, the now that is gone forever.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, Auster has traveled from the past and the present of his earlier novels, via the post-past and pre-future of *The Brooklyn Follies*, to the futureless *now* that is *Sunset Park*. The past is not the territory of Martin Amis where it is a 'huge palace in your mind, and you can go and visit all these different rooms and staircases and chambers'<sup>63</sup>, but a past that is closed off and inaccessible. While *Man in the Dark* ended with Rose Hawthorne's invocation that the 'weird world rolls on', there is an abiding sense in *Sunset Park* that the world has finally stopped in its tracks. As I write, this remains Auster's last novel, the text which he describes as 'the first book that consciously I wrote in the now, capital

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., pp. 307-308.

<sup>63</sup> Martin Amis, 'Intoxicating, free – the novelist life', *Daily Telegraph*, 15 October 2011.

N'.<sup>64</sup> Interviewed on the publication of *Sunset Park*, Auster confessed that the rich prolificacy of his earlier years had faded to a sense that to write another novel was no longer necessary. 'I used to have a backlog of stories', he said 'but a few years ago I found the drawers were empty. I guess I'm getting to the point where I tell myself if I can't write another book it's not a tragedy. Does it matter if I publish 16 or 17 novels? Unless it's absolutely urgent, there's no point in writing.'<sup>65</sup> Auster's admission would seem to suggest that his characters' silence might become Auster's own silence. If that were true James Wood would finally get his wish, although not for the reasons that he supposes.

Auster description of *Sunset Park* as his first attempt to write in the absolute present tense referenced his instinct that he needed to retreat from the absolute present tense and return to his own past:

[*Sunset Park*] is the first book that consciously I wrote in the now, capital 'N,' and it was also immediate, all so much about our present moment, that the impulse was to go back afterwards.<sup>66</sup>

That impulse to 'go back' took Auster to memoir once again. *The Invention of Solitude*, the memoir about his father that launched Auster's career, now has a slightly mournful twin. *Winter Journal* is written in the second person, an odd literary indulgence that excludes the reader by its own self-absorption. As Sarah Churchwell points out:

There is something coercive in his use of 'you' that provokes a reflexive resistance, a constant mental chorus asserting the reader's difference from him. The effect is deconstructive, in the proper Derridean sense in which that word is almost never used any more: the more Auster writes

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<sup>64</sup> Auster interviewed by David Daley, Salon, 19 August 2012.

<sup>65</sup> Auster interviewed by Helena de Bertodano, *Telegraph*, 16 Nov 2010.

<sup>66</sup> Auster interviewed by David Daley, Salon, 19 August, 2012, <[http://www.salon.com/2012/08/19/paul\\_auster\\_i\\_think\\_of\\_the\\_right\\_wing\\_republicans\\_as\\_jihadists/](http://www.salon.com/2012/08/19/paul_auster_i_think_of_the_right_wing_republicans_as_jihadists/)> [accessed 3 March 2013].



'you', the more we hear the thrum of the repetitive, solipsistic 'I' that it seeks to camouflage.<sup>67</sup>

There is a sense in which *Winter Journal* is Auster's end-of-career biopsy on himself, examining narcissistically his motivations, his crises and his failures. As he put it, 'the way I seem to generate books is to bounce off the one I've done before, so to negate it, to do the opposite.'<sup>68</sup> Auster does indeed do the opposite and reverts from the present to the past. But it is in the form of a frame narrative of the trauma that he said he will never get over, namely 9/11, which is where he concludes the final pages of his *Winter Journal*. In a striking elision, he slides from his familiar walk across Brooklyn Bridge in which he no longer sees the towers, to the day twenty five years earlier when he visited Bergen-Belsen with his German publisher Michael Naumann. The Towers become a negative image of themselves, in which they exist but only in the shape of the now empty space they once occupied. The smell of smoke in his daughter's bedroom is evoked too, as it was in the fragment of weak prose written on the day of the 9/11 attacks. But this time the prose is stronger, the tone more assertive, the faltering formulaic note gone:

Now that the Towers are gone you can no longer make the crossing without thinking about the dead, about seeing the Towers burn from your daughter's bedroom window on the top floor of your house, about the smoke and ashes that fell onto the streets of your neighbourhood for three days following the attack, and the bitter unbreathable stench that forced you to shut all the windows of your house until the winds finally shifted away from Brooklyn on Friday, and even though you have continued to cross the bridge two or three times a week in the nine and a half years since then, the journey is no longer the same, the dead are

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<sup>67</sup> Sarah Churchwell, 'Paul Auster has written a listless book, full of lists', *New Statesman*, 13 September 2012.

<<http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/culture/2012/09/novel-full-lists-yet-listless>> [accessed 15 May 2013].

<sup>68</sup> Auster interviewed by David Daley.

still there, and the Towers are there as well – pulsating in memory, still present as an empty hole in the sky.<sup>69</sup>

Still thinking about ‘the dead’, Auster allows the 9/11 victims to become the dead from the Second World War; it is as though, using his old defining phrase from *Mallarmé’s Son*, his words ‘leap out of themselves and catch hold of the succeeding cliff-edge of thought’ until the dead from the Towers become the dead in Belsen:

You were standing on top of the grave of fifty thousand men. It didn’t seem possible that so many dead bodies could fit into such a small space, and when you tried to imagine those bodies beneath you, the tangled corpses of fifty thousand young men packed into what must have been the deepest of deep holes, you began to grow dizzy at the thought of so much death, so much death concentrated in such a small patch of ground, a moment later you heard the screams, a tremendous surge of voices rose up from the ground beneath you, and you heard the bones of the dead howl in anguish, howl in pain, howl in a roaring cascade of full-throated, ear-splitting torment. *The earth was screaming.*<sup>70</sup>

Auster concludes his memoir with the words ‘You have entered the winter of your life’ and there is unquestionably a mournful sense that the post-past is upon him without any sense of a future unfolding; it is Tom’s old concept of the post-past but pre-future, a time during which Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit* has become detached from his past. In his attempts to define a literary hyperparallelism and to break the ties with the past, Auster has defined a bleak and unpromising landscape. He does not find refuge in the backwards glance as Foer and DeLillo did or seek the comfort of the individual’s small life as Ford did. He has attempted something different; to unhitch himself from time altogether and ultimately he fails. As Kermode put it so succinctly: ‘poets think, and are of their time.’<sup>71</sup> Auster’s attempt to make his characters ‘independent of

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<sup>69</sup> Paul Auster, *Winter Journal* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), p. 226. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>70</sup> Auster, *Winter Journal*, pp. 228-229.

<sup>71</sup> Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, p. 81.

time and succession' is nevertheless finally undone by Kermode's 'aevum', that is the overarching notion of duration of time which must, inevitably, lead to 9/11, which is in itself Auster's own end-stop. The peripeteia comes very late in *Sunset Park*; it is imagined in the final sentence as Nathan looks at his watch and notices, unknowingly, that it is 11 September 2001. But as Kermode pointed out, 'peripeteia depends on our confidence of the end; it is a disconfirmation followed by a consonance.'<sup>72</sup> Since Auster relies on the bleak consonance of his readers' knowledge of the event less than an hour after Nathan steps out into the sunshine, the absolute present tense must always dissolve into chaos and failure.

In the next chapter I will assess the way that writers from Pakistan have explored different timelines too, but in a far more politicized manner and on a much larger, broader scale. The effect in the hands of writers such as Kamila Shamsie and Nadeem Aslam is to minimise the import and scale of 9/11. For Pakistani novelists, 9/11 is part of a long historical continuum, not, as in Auster's view, the defining moment for a generation and for him as an individual. For Shamsie and Aslam 9/11 was a midpoint in history that had been developing for decades and would go on to have further drastic consequences.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

## CHAPTER 4: 'HISTORY IS THE THIRD PARENT'

### Introduction

The new Pakistani Anglophone novelists of the twenty-first century coalesce around their own spur of postcolonialism's long trajectory. Fiction writers from Pakistan do not appear to be either enticed or limited by the demands made upon Indian Anglophone novelists. Liberated, as I will argue in this chapter that they have been, from the expectations of the past, they are providing a uniquely powerful literary voice with which to express the post-9/11 landscape. The Calcutta-born novelist Sunetra Gupta has complained that she and her Indian contemporaries are shackled by the continuing expectation that they should be 'providing a commodity, like a package holiday.'<sup>1</sup> Novelists from Pakistan have no such burdens placed upon their modes of expression; different rules seem to apply:

The fundamental expectation has been that a big Indian novel could be found that would somehow express the essence of India and deliver it to a Western audience. That's essentially what Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* was. The attitude was, and people thought this was a very good thing, that all of India could be captured inside a novel like that. The postcolonial attitude has been to try to understand India. Indian writers in English were seen as people who could mediate that understanding.<sup>2</sup>

Sunetra Gupta's novel *The Glassblower's Breath* was reviewed by Claire Messud, author of the 9/11 novel *The Emperor's Children*. According to Gupta 'Claire Messud was outraged at my audacity in writing in the way that I did. How

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<sup>1</sup> Sunetra Gupta, interviewed by Charlie Lee-Potter, July 2010

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

dare I not write in plain English and convey the sights, sounds and smells of India. That was seen as my duty.’<sup>3</sup> Gupta’s complaint, shared by her contemporaries, is that Indian fiction writing is expected to cater for the armchair tourist who is still beguiled by old ideas of the nation’s colonial past; to somehow define India as being post-Empire while still being trapped within it. The Indian writer Amit Chaudhuri elaborated on Gupta’s complaints, suggesting that it was the 9/11 attacks that provoked Pakistan’s new novelists into shedding the old pre- and post-colonial tropes and embarking on new forms of expression. In his essay *Qatrina and the Books*<sup>4</sup>, Chaudhuri asked the question ‘what is Pakistani writing’ and concluded that the major contemporary novelists from Pakistan such as Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie and Nadeem Aslam emerged at a time ‘when the new supposed fundamentals of this century – free-market dominance, the end of history, the clash of civilizations – suddenly seemed frayed and ephemeral.’ Chaudhuri concluded that writers from Pakistan ‘are interestingly poised: implicated in both the unfolding and the unravelling of our age.’<sup>5</sup> He asserted that the old cultural context that informed the early short stories of the long-established Pakistani writer Aamer Hussein came ‘crashing down with the Twin Towers. It’s not as if the younger Pakistani writers habitually produce 9/11 novels, in the sense of the American and British sub-genre; it’s as if 9/11 has simply made a certain rehearsal of South Asian identity and history impossible, or even irrelevant.’<sup>6</sup>

That old rehearsal of ‘identity and history’, essentially the genre of fiction that Gupta complained was expected of her as an Indian novelist, has become irrelevant to writers such as Shamsie, Hamid and Aslam; its irrelevance, according to Chaudhuri, a consequence of 9/11. Freed from those expectations and from the constraints of transacting the culture in a nostalgic manner, they found themselves able to move towards a new rendition of ‘identity and history’. According to Aslam, it is not that Pakistan’s Anglophone novelists have cut themselves free of history. In some way they are more enmeshed than they have ever been; it is simply that they are choosing to express a different history:

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Amit Chaudhuri, ‘Qatrina and the Books’, *London Review of Books*, pub London Review of Books.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

We've lived through an extraordinary decade beginning with 9/11 and ending with the Arab Spring. And between these two moments we had the War on Terror, the call to Jihad, Guantanamo Bay, the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, the murder of Benazir Bhutto, the assassination of Osama Bin Laden, and a clash seems to have occurred between an incomplete understanding of the East and an incomplete understanding of the West.<sup>7</sup>

For Aslam, as for Chaudhuri, it is explicitly 9/11 that has brought about this new response to history:

I wanted to write a story that will bring in this decade but also will go back deeper and will use 9/11 as a hinge moment and see how much of the inadequacies of the pre 9/11 world went into the making of the post-9/11 world worse than it could have been. Meaning the idea of the inequality between nations, the inequalities *within* nations.<sup>8</sup>

In this chapter I will seek to establish those new identities and histories post-9/11, first via an analysis of Pakistan's novelists' particular interpretation of and response to trauma. Later in this chapter I will develop the idea of a palimpsestic treatment of text, memory and body. I will conclude with an assessment of Pakistani novelists' reading of and rejoinder to the United States.

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<sup>7</sup> Nadeem Aslam interviewed on *Nightwaves*, BBC Radio 3, 6 February 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

## Part One: Traces on the Skin

it's wrong what they say about the past, I've learned,  
about how you can bury it. Because the past claws  
its way out<sup>9</sup>

Khaled Hosseini

The cultural historian Thomas Laqueur, reviewing Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman's work *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*,<sup>10</sup> noted that the word 'trauma' appeared in the *New York Times* fewer than 300 times between the years 1851 and 1960. But the word 'has appeared 11,000 times since'.<sup>11</sup> Laqueur elaborated on the reasons for this exponential increase in the use of the word:

It is not a resurgent interest in wounds but the elaboration of a new meaning which emerged in the late nineteenth century, when trauma's unambiguous outsideness began to give way to interiority: it became a psychic injury, a 'thorn in the spirit', as William James put it, an injury done not to the body but to the mind by violence, or by any unspeakable or unassimilable experience. In the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth these mental wounds were understood to be represented in the body by such symptoms as paralysis, sleeplessness, fatigue, palpitations etc. But today one doesn't need to have any symptoms at all to be regarded as traumatized. The 'condition of victimhood' is democratically available; the past itself can lodge a 'thorn in the spirit.'<sup>12</sup>

Laqueur added that once trauma 'expands to become the psychic and metaphorical trace of all pasts in anyone's present, [it] erases as much of a

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<sup>9</sup> Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* (2003; London: Bloomsbury, 2008), p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* trans. by Rachel Gomme (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Laqueur, 'We Are All Victims Now', *London Review of Books*, vol. 32, no. 13 (8 July 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

victim's life as it might recover.'<sup>13</sup> However, Laqueur's definition of trauma as a state that appears to erase rather than delineate identity is not the trauma elucidated by Shamsie, Aslam or Hamid. Laqueur's title *We Are all Victims Now* is redolent of an article by Gary Younge in the *Guardian* in October 2001 in which he used the phrase in an entirely different way to underscore the point that we are all made victims by the actions of Tony Blair and George Bush:

every bomb they drop turns what was an unpopular, dangerous outsider into a hero among a significant and growing minority of the Muslim world. With the west's help Bin Laden has managed to present himself as the largest immovable object against American cultural, political and economic hegemony. This is disastrous for all of us. Not only are Bush and Blair not defeating terrorism, they are creating a generation of terrorists for the future. With enemies like these, Bin Laden does not need friends.<sup>14</sup>

However, Laqueur's definition of universal victimhood suggests we are somehow complicit in the process; our individual identities are erased by the ubiquitous nature of our complaint that we have all suffered trauma, in a reinterpretation of Goethe's observation in 1787 that 'I do believe that in the end humanity will win. I am only afraid that at the same time the world will have turned into one huge hospital where everyone is everyone else's humane nurse.'<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to note that Fassin and Rechtman share this sense of the universality of victimhood, pointing out that the expectation after 9/11 was that New York would turn into 'one huge hospital'. As a result, nine thousand mental health workers massed in the city to offer their services. As I will go on to discuss, Shamsie, Aslam and Hamid appear to define a victimhood that is not 'democratically available' to all but is undemocratically dished out to some, and in which victims are not 'erased' by trauma but made different by it.

Kamila Shamsie has fundamental objections to the way in which America appears to have laid claim to the notion of victimhood; the way that, as defined

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Gary Younge, 'We Are All Victims Now', *Guardian*, 15 October 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Italian Journey*, (1787; London: Penguin Classics 1982), p. 317.



by Catherine Morley, American writers, 'possibly overwhelmed by the enormity of the attacks, their spectacular nature and the apparent incompatibility of the terrifying images and mere words, turned inward to depict fractured unions and broken homes.'<sup>16</sup> Shamsie believes they have adopted an excessively narrow focus, one that springs from a narcissistic and xenophobic approach to history. It is a narrowness of focus that was made explicitly desirable by novelist Jonathan Franzen in his immediate journalistic response to 9/11. He wrote of his craving to 'reassert the ordinary, the trivial, and even the ridiculous in the face of instability and dread: to mourn the dead and try to awaken our small humanities and our pleasurable daily nothing-much.'<sup>17</sup> Shamsie, in her novel *Burnt Shadows*, deliberately spans more than half a century of international history and chooses as her central motif the physical and mental trauma suffered by victims of America's bombing of Nagasaki. Hers is a global novel, in which the importance of connectivity is stressed and American isolationism and exceptionalism are derided. *Burnt Shadows* forms part of the 'centrifugal literature of extraterritoriality' recommended by Michael Rothberg; not only does it 'imagine how US citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state'<sup>18</sup>, as Rothberg suggests that it should, the work is placed in a historical context in order to map out how events have evolved, not just from 9/11, but from the history that went before and is likely to come after.

The definition of 9/11 as a seminal moment is one that she takes exception to, as she told me when I interviewed her. In many ways she agrees with Amit Chaudhuri that the new Pakistani novelists have a different and far wider agenda, and she concurs with Nadeem Aslam's assertion that 9/11 should be written about as a 'hinge moment':

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<sup>16</sup> Catherine Morley, 'How Do We Write about This? The domestic and the Global in the Post-9/11 Novel', *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 45, issue 4 (November 2011), pp. 717-731, p. 719.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Franzen, 'The Talk of the Town', *New Yorker*, 24 September 2001, <[http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2001/09/24/010924ta\\_talk\\_wtc](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2001/09/24/010924ta_talk_wtc)> [accessed 16 May 2013].

<sup>18</sup> Michael Rothberg, 'A Failure of the Imagination: Diagnosing the Post-9/11 Novel: A Response to Richard Gray', *American Literary History*, vol. 21, no. 1 (Spring 2009), pp. 152-158, p. 158.

I don't believe I have written a 9/11 novel. I have written a War on Terror novel. American and English writers seem to be more interested in the 9/11 novel and what 9/11 meant, rather than how events came to that day. There's an interesting distinction starting to form, where the United States will write about the day itself while Pakistani writers are more interested in what came before and after.<sup>19</sup>

Shamsie presents trauma as an attritional force of history upon the stoical individual, rather than Laqueur's 'psychic and metaphorical trace of all pasts in anyone's present'. The injuries suffered by her character Hiroko are inflicted not by the events of 9/11 but by the atomic bomb dropped by the United States on Nagasaki in 1945. Hiroko is a 'hibakusha', literally 'an explosion-affected person'. In the previous chapter I elucidated on Don DeLillo's attempts, in his novel *Falling Man*, to use the motif of organic shrapnel to signify his hibakushas, those characters who have both suffered the experience of 9/11 and who then bear the marker of it in perpetuity. But Shamsie's definition of traumatic injury is not one in which the body is simply damaged and infiltrated. Rather, it is a form of denaturing, the chemical process whereby proteins change their structure irreversibly beyond a certain temperature and thus appear to coagulate. The burns scorched into Hiroko's back take the shape of cranes, symbol of peace and good fortune in Japan, which were woven into her kimono. The flesh itself is transmuted, as indeed is she:

There is feeling, then no feeling, skin and something else. Where there is skin, there is feeling. Where there is something else there is none. Her fingers pluck at shreds embedded in the something else. Shreds of what – skin or silk? She shrugs off the kimono. It falls from her shoulders, but does not touch the ground. Something keeps it attached to her.<sup>20</sup>

And then:

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<sup>19</sup> Kamila Shamsie interviewed by Charlie Lee-Potter, May 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Kamila Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), p. 26. All subsequent references are to this edition.

Fire and smoke and, through the smoke, nothing. Through the smoke, land that looks the way her back feels where it has no feeling. She touches the something else on her back. Her fingers can feel her back but her back cannot feel her fingers. Charred silk, seared flesh. How is this possible? Urakami Valley has become her flesh. Her flesh has become Urakami Valley.<sup>21</sup>

Kamila Shamsie intended the shrapnel of Nagasaki to change the elements of Hiroko's character. The atomic bomb is a genetic modifier. It transmutes itself via the catastrophic power of nuclear fission and then, having modified itself, it modifies everything around it irreversibly. Hiroko becomes a different chemical and physical structure once she has endured the effect of that bomb. As Shamsie put it, 'Hiroko is carrying Nagasaki on her back. It is both literal and metaphorical. Every time she touches her back, that's Nagasaki.'<sup>22</sup>

Hiroko's grotesque tattoo by history forms a startling counterpoint to the elective tattoo by the unnamed American soldier in Nadeem Aslam's 2013 novel, *The Blind Man's Garden*. His tattoo is a choice, the word 'infidel' inscribed in Arabic across his back as a deliberate shocking insult to Islam. Aslam's prose is characterized by its floriated style and grandiloquent imagination, but in this instance he says that he was merely relying on fact:

These tattoos are quite common. Just go to the internet and type in 'infidel tattoo' and American soldiers with any number of infidel tattoos will come up. And then of course he is caught and he has to keep his back covered. And then my hero has to make sure that no-one sees his back.<sup>23</sup>

Aslam's hero, as he puts it, is Mikal, a Pakistani man who is being hunted by the Americans for killing two of their Military Police officers. Mikal literally and metaphorically protects his US adversary's back; the American's markings are not the manifestation of trauma, they are the provokers of it in those around

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>22</sup> KS interviewed by CLP.

<sup>23</sup> Nadeem Aslam interviewed on *The Strand*, BBC World Service, 6 February 2013.

him. The American, I would suggest, is given the perverse luxury of choosing to have his skin etched and marked as an elective boast of his culture and religion. It is a triumphalist gesture, far removed from the tattoos of early nineteenth-century sailors, for whom a religious marking was an indicator that they should be given a Christian burial.

Shamsie's use of the markings on Hiroko's back is very specific. To her, the dazzling light of the nuclear explosion itself is representative of a 'nothingness of feeling. That blinding white light, that light is an absence, it's an obliteration. [Hiroko is] without nerve endings. She carries it on her back. But she's not clawing at her scabs. It's an absent world now. [...] Something has been removed. What does that do to memory? It's an absolute loss. Your memory reminds you of what was. It's memory that draws attention to that blankness. It's like a dynamited home. It's telling you how empty it is, because you remember the house, It's an absent present.'<sup>24</sup>

The 'absent present' also has the capacity to transmute still further. Much later in the novel it is established that those same birds, scorched into her flesh leaving scars that are 'a relic of hell', have taken on a new anthropomorphic power as poisonous corrupters:

In the first years after Nagasaki she had dreams in which she awoke to find the tattoos gone from her skin, and knew the birds were inside her now, their beaks dripping venom into her bloodstream, their charred wings engulfing her organs.<sup>25</sup>

The transmutation of the flesh is reinforced by the assertion that Hiroko sees herself 'as a creature of myth, a character who loses everything and is born anew in blood. In the stories these characters were always reduced to a single element: vengeance or justice. All other components of personality and past shrugged off.'<sup>26</sup> And later in the novel we learn that alteration of the flesh

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<sup>24</sup> KS interviewed by CLP.

<sup>25</sup> Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows*, p. 222.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

extends still further, in the catastrophic genetic manipulation of Hiroko's unborn child, the next generation.

Shamsie is at pains to provide a contrast to the 'new creature of myth' who loses everything and is 'born anew' by the experience. The alternative to the newly created being is an extreme form of the 'obliteration', the 'absence' that Shamsie cited in her interview; first, in the form of Hiroko's father who is transformed into a no-longer human reptilian creature by the bomb:

Hiroko looks down, sees a reptile crawling up the path towards her house. She understands now. The earth has already opened up, disgorged hell. Her neighbour's daughter is running towards the reptile with a bamboo spear in her hand ... The reptile raises its head and the girl drops the spear...<sup>27</sup>

There is a yet more extreme stage; that of obliteration, the fate suffered by Hiroko's German lover Konrad:

Those nearest the epicentre of the blast were eradicated completely, only the fat from their bodies sticking to the walls and rocks around them like shadows... and I looked for Konrad's shadow. I found it. Or I found something that I believed was it. On a rock. Such a lanky shadow.<sup>28</sup>

Just as Jonathan Safran Foer's Oskar Schell buries his grandfather's letters in his father's grave because there is nothing else to inter, Hiroko rolls the rock to the International Cemetery to bury it instead of Konrad. Before the rock/man goes to its/his grave, 'she had lain down on Konrad's shadow, within Konrad's shadow, her mouth pressed against the darkness of his chest'.<sup>29</sup>

Hiroko's fate is to have her flesh made into 'an absence' and Konrad's fate is to become an imagined shadow on a rock, literally to be made nothing. However, Aslam in his novel *The Wasted Vigil* principally explores trauma in a subtly

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

different manner, presenting it as the process by which someone is made less than they were, to analyze the effect, both on the body and on the reader I would suggest, of removing parts of the physical body under torture and persecution. It should be said however that in *The Blind Man's Garden* he depicts a scene in which two Taliban members are so brutally beaten by a crowd that they vanish:

Every ounce of rage – every rape, every disappearance, every public execution, every hand amputated during the past seven years of the Taliban regime, every twelve-year-old boy pressed into battle by them, every ten-year-old girl forcibly married to a mullah eight times her age, every man lashed, every woman beaten, every limb broken – was poured into the two men by fist, club, stick, foot and stone, and when they finished and dispersed nothing remained of the pair. It was as if they had been eaten.<sup>30</sup>

However, this episode is less an evocation of trauma as suffered by the dead Taliban men who have been 'made nothing.' It is, I would suggest, another instance of Aslam pointing to the way in which the crowd, so abused and persecuted by the Taliban, have been 'made less' by the trauma they have suffered. In Aslam's earlier novel, Marcus Caldwell, an English doctor living in an old perfume factory close to the Tora Bora Mountains, is literally made less than he was by the Taliban's order that his doctor wife Qatrina should amputate his left hand. Marcus's 'crime' was to be accused of theft when he was found arguing with a man about a trunk containing 99 of Qatrina's paintings, each of them bearing one of Allah's names but surrounded by forbidden images. The final act of his left hand is to stroke Qatrina's palm as she starts to cut. In the subsequent days, even though the hand was missing, it 'still hurt as though he had closed the absent fingers around a scorpion.'

Qatrina, having been ordered to cut off her own husband's hand, is 'made nothing' by the disintegration of her mind. Her final staging post to erasure is when she is publicly stoned, shrouded to the point of invisibility:

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<sup>30</sup> Nadeem Aslam, *The Blind Man's Garden* (London: Faber & Faber, 2013), p. 47. All subsequent references are to this edition.

Afterwards, as she lay on the ground, a man had gathered the hem of the burka and tied it into a knot and dragged her away as he would a bundle, and he grinned at his own ingenuity the while, as did the spectators. Blood was draining steadily through the holes of the embroidered eye-grille.<sup>31</sup>

The fate of Benedikt, the Soviet soldier who disappeared after his country invaded Afghanistan in 1979, is no less gruesome and similarly symbolically charged. He is made the target of the traditional Afghan contest of 'buzkashi'. First, he is crippled by having his Achilles tendons cut. And then the signal for the start of the game begins:

When the rifle shot comes he thinks they have fired into him, but no, he hasn't been shot, and now a dozen hands grab onto his limbs and hair and clothing and he feels himself being lifted unevenly off the ground.<sup>32</sup>

In his subsequent novel, *The Blind Man's Garden*, Aslam continues to experiment with the idea that torture should make someone 'less than' they were. Rohan, traumatized by his wife's death as an apostate and by his son's murder, is blinded by an Afghan warlord who rubs dust from a pulverized ruby into his eyes. (It is typical of Aslam's byzantine imagination that the ruby crushed to dust by the warlord should have been swallowed by Rohan's son as a child but offered back bizarrely by his corpse.) The ruby blinding echoes the removal of the radical Muslim youth Casa's left eye by the former CIA operative James Palantine in *The Wasted Vigil*. A CIA torturer in one novel, an Afghan warlord in another, a bizarre trans-novel eye for an eye ritual by two opposing sides. Aslam is nothing if not even-handed.

In the later novel however, it is remarkable how uncomplaining, how silent, how accepting he ensures his characters are, even under the most gruesome physical duress. Like Oroonoko, the Royal Slave of Aphra Behn's 1688 work who stood silently smoking a pipe as his tormentors cut limbs, flesh and organs

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<sup>31</sup> Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil*, p. 135.

<sup>32</sup> Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil*, p. 366.

from his body, Mikal endures torture from both American and Afghani adversaries without making a sound, as far as we know. Indeed, Aslam, whose prose is at times overburdened by adjectival richness, is deliberately parsimonious when it comes to the evocation of responses to pain. I would suggest that Aslam is drawing on Hannah Arendt's assertion that sound, rage or rebellion can only emerge under torture if there is a possibility 'that conditions could be changed':

It is no doubt possible to create conditions under which men are dehumanized – such as concentration camps, torture, famine – but this does not mean that they become animal-like; and under such conditions, not rage and violence, but their conspicuous absence is the clearest sign of dehumanization. Rage is by no means an automatic reaction to misery and suffering as such; no one reacts with rage to an incurable disease or to an earthquake or, for that matter, to social conditions that seem to be unchangeable. Only where there is reason to suspect that conditions could be changed and are not does rage arise.<sup>33</sup>

If Aslam's characters are indeed unconsciously accepting of the idea that conditions *cannot* be changed and therefore they remain silent, it would suggest that the long view of history taken by Aslam, Shamsie and to an extent Hamid has a more pernicious force to it than simply offering a different historical and global perspective to that deployed by American novelists. Aslam's phrase that 'History is the third parent' takes on new heft<sup>34</sup>; he could perhaps have added that 'history is also the third child', given his apparent belief that not only are his characters governed by what went before, but their silence suggests they will acquiesce with what comes after, too. The 'locked-in suffering' explored by Tim Armstrong in *The Logic of Slavery* resonates, the slave figure exchanged here for Aslam's beleaguered and oppressed Pakistani characters; Armstrong's argument that the 'central demand of slavery itself was that slaves contain their feelings, remaining mute in their suffering'<sup>35</sup> is an alternative interpretation to

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<sup>33</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1969), Kindle edition, p. 160.

<sup>34</sup> Aslam, *The Blind Man's Garden*, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Tim Armstrong, *The Logic of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 116. All subsequent references are to this edition.



that given by Arendt, that disobedience or dissent will only arise if conditions for change seem likely or at least possible. Armstrong's assessment is that the call for silence is an expectation by the oppressor rather than a choice by the oppressed, a view that is imbricated more neatly into Aslam's apparent definition than into Arendt's. Armstrong points, too, to the 'amputation metaphor', in which the 'slave is 'fractured' by the encounter with white America'<sup>36</sup> and in which 'the metaphorical 'body' so created carries its history as a visible cut, bespeaking an identity of self and history.'<sup>37</sup> The carrying of history in the form of an amputation or a mutilation is used consistently by Aslam and Shamsie, where body parts are ritualistically sliced, severed and mutilated; 'self and history' are on parade as metaphors but within literal amputated flesh. In Aslam's novel *The Wasted Vigil* an entire head is severed, the head itself, in the mythic mode cited by Shamsie, assuming its role as the carrier and signifier of history. As I will demonstrate, Aslam then attempts to restore totemic power to the head, although perhaps not entirely successfully.

Before his eye is removed by blowtorch, Casa finds Benedikt's head locked inside the box of Qatrina's paintings, the same box over which Marcus had argued and for which he lost his hand. When Casa finds the box it is being held in the compound of the Muslim warlord Gul Rasool, who is in turn being protected by the former CIA man Palantine:

It's something spherical wrapped in a dark torn shirt, and when he sees that it is a man's head he lets it drop in shock, the desiccated skin, the empty eye sockets, the dried-up nerves and blood vessels issuing from the torn neck...<sup>38</sup>

Aslam's description of Benedikt's desiccated head reaches out to Shamsie's endeavour to represent Hiroko as a 'creature of myth', a being 'reduced to a single element: vengeance or justice. All other components of personality and past shrugged off.'<sup>39</sup> Benedikt is nothing but a head, all else has gone; he is the dried, grotesque, miniature replica of the giant stone head of Buddha that lies in

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>38</sup> Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil*, p. 407.

<sup>39</sup> Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows*, p. 49.

Marcus' perfume factory; stoical, enduring, the synecdoche of human suffering. However, before death Benedikt, while being tortured, is representative of his tormentors' power, as defined by Elaine Scarry:

What by the one is experienced as a continual contraction is for the other a continual expansion, for the torturer's growing sense of self is carried outward on the prisoner's swelling pain. As an actual physical fact, a weapon is an object that goes into the body and produces pain. As a perceptual fact, it lifts the pain out of the body and makes it visible or, more precisely, it acts as a bridge or mechanism across which some of pain's attributes – its incontestable reality, its totality, its ability to eclipse all else, its power of dramatic alteration and world dissolution – can be lifted away from their source, can be separated from the sufferer and referred to power, broken off from the body and attached instead to the regime. Now, at least for the duration of this obscene and pathetic drama, it is not the pain but the regime that is incontestably real, not the pain but the regime that is total, not the pain but the regime that is able to eclipse all else, not the pain but the regime that is able to dissolve the world.<sup>40</sup>

Benedikt under torture is representative of exactly that notion, that a body can somehow be transformed into the power of the tormentor. But after death, when his head is placed inside the box that once held Qatrina's banned paintings, I would suggest that although his voice cannot become his own again, the power held by his torturers is at least partially wrested back. There is a dialogic force at play here; as the reductionist symbol of his own identity, Benedikt's severed head does expose the power of the regime for what it was, 'a fiction'. The Samsonite head, that essence of self, is a hideous recriminatory taunt at his torturers' inhumanity, as well as a reminder, as the banned paintings were, of their intolerance. To this extent, the severed head is both the metonymical emblem of all those who have been persecuted as well as a politically charged totem with which to admonish the torturer. In *The Beheading*, a short story by Mohsin Hamid, the writer uses the severed head as a political imperative, as a

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<sup>40</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 56.

way to admonish not the torturer but himself, should he ever find himself lacking the will or courage to speak. After publication Hamid stated that he wrote the story of the kidnapping and beheading of a Pakistani writer because 'it expressed a pernicious fear, a fear that gives rise to self-censorship. I thought in writing it I would become, if not braver, then at least more questioning of my silences and those of others.'<sup>41</sup> Hamid's narratively stretching concept is to write from the point of view of the beheaded man, concluding the story at the point of death:

I can see the long knife in his hand. He's speaking into the camera. I don't want to watch. I shut my eyes. I want to do something to make my heart explode so I can be gone now. I don't want to stay.

Then I hear it. I hear the sound of my blood rushing out and I open my eyes to see it on the floor like ink and I watch as I end before I am empty.<sup>42</sup>

Like Aslam and Shamsie, Hamid is generous with detail, but scant with pain, a clear rejoinder to Roger Luckhurst's admonitions about the use of 'torture porn' in the context of the artistic response to 9/11. Armstrong's idea of the 'locked-in suffering' of the slave is framed here by the withholding of the detail that would make that suffering pornographic to readers who might desire it. It is as though the trio of writers have an unspoken pact to keep the reader on the ascetic path of ideology and politics rather than be distracted by the more baroque grotesqueries of tortured flesh.

The most shocking torture scene in *The Wasted Vigil* comes towards the end of the novel, the scene I alluded to earlier in this chapter. On the orders of James Palantine, an unnamed American directs a blowtorch into Casa's left eye, in a nod towards the biblical justice of 'eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'. In this case, it is a left eye in exchange for the left hand of Marcus:

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<sup>41</sup> Mohsin Hamid, 'Silencing Pakistan', *Express Tribune with the International Herald Tribune*, 4 June 2011, <<http://tribune.com.pk/story/181760/silencing-pakistan/>> [accessed 21 February 2013].

<sup>42</sup> Mohsin Hamid, 'A Beheading', *Granta* 112: *Pakistan*, Autumn 2010.

Casa's mouth is open in a twisted soundless scream, that eye erupting black blood. The boy with the blowtorch stands up with a glance towards James, the blue fang-like flame briefly touching Casa's hair so that a patch of it catches fire with a crackle.<sup>43</sup>

Elaine Scarry's suggestion that there is a 'crisis of belief' in the central ideology of the West is born out in this passage. The 'sheer material factualness of the human body'<sup>44</sup> is most definitely claimed in order to 'lend that cultural construct the aura of 'realness' and 'certainty'. An aura, however, is all that it is granted.

Any sense of 'realness' and 'certainty' is methodically dissolved by Mohsin Hamid in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. It is made the fate of the American woman Erica to lose her mind and to fade from life, just as it is for Qatrina in Nadeem Aslam's novel. And yet I would argue there is a sense in Mohsin Hamid's work that Erica is somehow not entitled to this fate, that there is a mismatch between actual damage and cultural trauma; she has not suffered sufficiently, certainly not on any comparable scale to Qatrina, who has been forced to amputate her own husband's hand and is then publicly stoned before dying in prison, spitting maggots from the festering wounds in her mouth and nose. It is suggested that Erica is almost indulgently following the trajectory of the stressed, even neurotic American for whom collapse is the inevitable outcome. She is the essence of America, her name a truncated form of the nation's, just as the name of Changez' employer, United Sampson, is, in its abbreviated form, an acronym and the embodiment of the US.

Like Qatrina, Erica is being 'made less', and not simply in name. She is gradually erased by her trauma, erasure being the term cited by Laqueur but expressly not used by Shamsie, Aslam or Hamid as a means of expressing trauma in their non-American characters. There is a sense in which Hamid suggests that Erica is erased, but without sufficient cause. As the first signs of her anxiety begin to manifest themselves, Hamid writes that this was a 'diminished Erica, not the vivid, confident woman I knew but a pale, nervous creature who could almost have been a stranger. She seemed to have lost

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<sup>43</sup> Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil*, p. 410.

<sup>44</sup> Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p. 14.

weight ...<sup>45</sup> Later, Erica is described as 'emaciated, detached and so lacking in life.'<sup>46</sup> Changez speculates in the novel about the nature of Erica's illness and what had triggered it. '...was it the trauma of the attack on her city? [...], but I think I knew even then that she was disappearing into a powerful nostalgia, one from which only she could choose whether or not to return.'<sup>47</sup> Indeed she does not, completing her literal self-effacement by leaving her clothes on a 'rocky bluff overlooking the Hudson, neatly folded in a pile'. Technically from that moment she is a 'missing person', but the reality is that she has been a 'missing person' for a long time.

The implied nostalgia engaged in by Erica chimes closely with the broader, explicit accusations of narcissism made by Kamila Shamsie. This is the dichotomy that I suggest emerges between the American and non-American definition of trauma. Trauma is defined in Shamsie and Aslam's work as a national wound endured over many decades, with countless examples of extreme and routine violence. This certainly differs from the definition of trauma exposed in Hamid's analysis of Erica's fragile American psyche, but perhaps more importantly it differs from the sense of trauma suffered by the USA as a result of the assaults on a single day in 2001. Just as Shamsie stated that 'the US is so used to seeing itself largely as a country different on September 12<sup>th</sup> 2001', so too does Hamid's character Changez, who likens America's reaction to the petulance of a badly behaved child:

America was engaged only in posturing. As a society, you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority. And you acted out these beliefs on the stage of the world, so that the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions of your tantrums ...<sup>48</sup>

The 'tantrums' and Erica's lack of entitlement to the indulgence of mental collapse, have an echo in the scenes that examine Erica's unfinished and

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<sup>45</sup> Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, p. 102.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>48</sup> Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, pp. 167-168.

unpublished novel. When Changez finally reads her manuscript, given to him by Erica's mother after her collapse, he finds not a 'tortured, obviously autobiographical affair' but 'simply a tale of adventure, of a girl on an island who learns to make do'. There is a strong sense of inadequacy, that this 'spare' tale which is full of little details such as 'the texture of the skin of a piece of fallen fruit, for example, or in the swaying antennae of crayfish in a stream' comes nowhere close to capturing the complexities or travails of life. The apparent inadequacy of Erica's text, as well as her failure to finish it, has echoes in Claire Messud's 9/11 work *The Emperor's Children*. Her novel contains not one unfinished work, but two. One is the empty, fraudulent and posturing *How to Live* of Marina's vain father; the other is Marina's absurd attempt to define society in terms of children's clothing, taking as its title an expanded version of Messud's own novel's title, becoming *The Emperor's Children Have No Clothes*.

It has been suggested that Messud must endorse Marina's project and sanction her intellectual power by the mere fact of using Marina's title as her own. I see little evidence for this and would suggest that Messud is heading off potential criticism levelled at anyone who attempts to write a 9/11 novel, by taking a self-mocking sideswipe at her own endeavour first. (This was perhaps wise, given the artistic flaws in her attempt.) In part to capture both the vanity of Erica's artistic endeavour, as well as the preciousness of American angst and sense of 'universal victimhood' cited earlier in this chapter, Mohsin Hamid wrote seven separate drafts of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. He tried a first person narrative, a third person narrative, an American protagonist, a Pakistani principal character and then a combination of the two. He finally chose the rarely used dramatic monologue because it 'allowed me to capture the way in which the world sees itself today, in a sense of mutual suspicion. It almost mimics the global media where so often you hear one side of the story. My novel is written in a form that takes the reverse side of the media; it hands the content over to the 'reluctant fundamentalist'. It is equally biased. The reader has to realize, though, that the novel is only a version of the truth.'<sup>49</sup>

This again chimes with Shamsie's view that 'American and English writers seem to be more interested in the 9/11 novel and what 9/11 meant, rather than how

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<sup>49</sup> Mohsin Hamid's official website.

events came to that day.’ Shamsie goes further, in defining what Hamid’s novel achieves by its use of the dramatic monologue, arguing that ‘there’s a tension between the filter of a narrator whom we’re not sure we are able to trust. It’s reversing the old colonial narrative in which the colonial voice represented the characters from the sub continent. It’s playful because the narrator is so unreliable. It’s conscious of the fact that we’re so used to hearing and accepting just one voice. It’s drawing attention to the limitations of only listening to one voice.’<sup>50</sup>

However, Shamsie appears to make a distinction between her method of ensuring that multiple voices are present, and Mohsin Hamid’s method. Her novel is less ambitious in form and technique, but this may be because, as she put it, ‘Mohsin seems to feel more American than me. I saw two Americas very clearly, but most people didn’t want to see the America I saw’. So while she believes that *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* draws ‘attention to the limitations of listening to one voice’, she seems to mark herself out as standing outside the compound in which Hamid at times places himself. However, Shamsie deliberately references ‘the old colonial narrative’ too. Harry Burton’s daughter Kim holds within her name the essence of the colonial voice in Kipling’s eponymous character. In addition Shamsie consistently evokes the colonial voice of E M Forster:

Yes, you’re right about the connections to Kipling’s *Kim* and to *A Passage to India*. But it isn’t explicit. I don’t need to offer guidance to the reader. When I was writing about James and Sajjad, *A Passage to India* was just lurking there and I decided to make use of it. With Kim, I was quite genuinely thinking that Kim would do as the name for quite a while before Kipling came into my mind. Then it made it perfect.<sup>51</sup>

Just as the trauma of the past leaves its trace in these writers’ characters, so too do sound-waves of past novels make their mark on the text. The Bakhtinian notion of the dialogic nature of the novel is writ large in all three writers’ work, each deploying those echoing intertextual references to powerful effect. The

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<sup>50</sup> KS interviewed by CLP.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

ability to talk in more than one voice is, after all, both a function and a virtue of fiction, as I will go on to discuss. All three writers deploy the motif of the palimpsest with which to explore their responses to history's trace.

## Part 2: History's Palimpsest

Since the beginning of time [...] forgetting has been the norm and remembering the exception. Today [...] forgetting has become the exception, and remembering the default<sup>52</sup>

Viktor Mayer-Schonberger

There are many instances in these novels in which the multiple voices of fiction are rendered in physical form. When Nadeem Aslam's character Lara in *The Wasted Vigil* returns to Russia after her mother's death, she visits the flat where she used to live and finds her mother's notebooks scattered on the pavement:

Only the first page in each was filled. The rest were blank. She hadn't turned over a new page, had written and drawn on the same one repeatedly so that the feelings and ideas were juxtaposed onto each other, indecipherable, the way a book of glass would be, the eye having access to its depth through the overlapping layers of contents.<sup>53</sup>

This passage makes reference to both multiple voices, but also to the notion that we have 'access' to a host of 'layers of contents' simultaneously. There are

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<sup>52</sup> Viktor Mayer-Schonberger, *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age* (2009; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 2.

<sup>53</sup> Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil*, p. 313.



echoes here of Gerhard Richter's painting *September*, examined in my Introduction, as well as of Freud's Mystic Writing Pad, in which 'the permanent trace of what was written is retained upon the wax slab itself and is legible in certain lights'.<sup>54</sup> So too does it evoke thoughts of Balzac's 1837 story *The Unknown Masterpiece*, in which the painter Frenhofer struggles to represent the irrecoverable on his canvas. These ideas of the irrecoverable and the unreliable run counter to the view expressed by Peter Middleton and Tim Woods that 'With the technology of writing, a vastly extended social memory becomes possible, enabling a society to extend its control over large areas of space and time, and to ensure its posterity by transmitting records of its achievements to descendants on whom its future integrity depends.'<sup>55</sup> This, they argue, is summarized by Paul Connerton, who said that 'what has been fixed in writing enters into a sphere of publicly accessible meanings in which everyone who can subsequently read that writing has potentially a share in its meanings.'<sup>56</sup> But Aslam appears to be suggesting that the overlapping words on a single page are not the means by which 'control over large areas of space and time' can be exerted, or even the way in which memory can be ensured 'posterity'. His is a less literal approach to the recording of memory, in that he appears to be explicitly suggesting that the vagueness, the inexactitude, the failings of memory are virtues, not its proscriptive, definitive nature.

Aslam's loose approach to memory applies an entirely different interpretation to the concept of the overlapping word than that conjured from an American perspective by Don DeLillo's 'braided wick' that I discussed in Chapter 2 or by Jonathan Safran Foer. In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, a vision of the palimpsest is invoked by Foer when we learn that Oskar's grandfather has written over and over again on the same sheet of paper. To render that image explicit, he includes within the text a photograph of the over-scored, blackened sheet made illegible by the density and weight of ink upon it. In Foer's case, the endlessly overwritten sheet is a representation of the 'conversations we weren't

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<sup>54</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'A Note upon the "Mystic Writing Pad"', *General Psychological Theory, Chapter XIII*, 1925). p.. 211, <<http://home.uchicago.edu/~awinter/mystic.pdf>> [accessed 20 May 2013].

<sup>55</sup> Peter Middleton and Tim Woods, *Literatures of Memory: History, time and space in postwar writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 96.

having' and with 'all the things we couldn't share'.<sup>57</sup> The overlap is a sorrowful rendition of the impossibility of saying what we mean, rather than a physical embodiment of the unreliability of memory.

Earlier in Foer's 9/11 work, Oskar's grandfather recalls that, years before, he had stripped the ribbon from the typewriter he had given Oskar's grandmother to write her life story. He had removed the ribbon as 'an act of revenge against ... myself, I'd pulled it into one long thread, unwinding the negative it held – the future homes I had created for Anna, the letters I wrote without response – as if it would protect me from my actual life.'<sup>58</sup> In an underscoring of the hopelessness of ever saying what is meant, it is revealed later in the novel, that far from not realising that she has been typing invisible words, Oskar's grandmother has known all along. 'I went to the guest room and pretended to write. I hit the space bar again and again and again. My life story was spaces.'<sup>59</sup>

The act of writing that makes explicit the impossibility of saying what you mean is the counterview to that expressed by Nadeem Aslam. The over-written sheets of Lara's mother later exude their meaning when Lara and Marcus talk about them. 'A dependable clarity dissolved out of him. An aura. It was as though she had been able to make out each of the pages her mother thought she was filling her notebooks with in her last days.'<sup>60</sup> Ideas are invoked here by Aslam not just of 'an aura' but of Marcus acting as an aura, a medium. Lara's mother is somehow present in her over-scored sheets; the medium is the message. So, far from seeing the multiple voice or the multiple word as a barrier to understanding, Aslam celebrates its depth and its power.

The motif of the blank as opposed to the over-written page is commandeered towards the close of Aslam's novel. Casa, contemplating the rape of Dania before he goes to his martyr's death, starts to record the truth about himself. We assume that, as a young man from Afghanistan, he is writing in Pashto. He would of course start writing at the top right of the right hand side and finish at the bottom left. But Aslam places great weight on this fact, and takes care to

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<sup>57</sup> Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, p. 278.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>60</sup> Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil*, p. 417.

underline the point. The impression is given, to a Western audience, that there is a sense in which Casa is looking back on his life and that he is, perhaps for the first time, attempting to record the truth or even to re-write his life by going backwards. The scene has resonances with the passage in Safran Foer's novel in which Oskar's grandfather strips the ribbon from his typewriter and unwinds 'the negative it held':

he begins to write, beginning at the top right-hand corner of the right page and intending to stop upon getting to the bottom left of the facing page. Sentences about himself. The truth. He can only say it in the dark. Even his eyes are closed as he arranges the small words on the paper. But it is difficult to write like this, and so, after only half a dozen lines, he moves towards the lamp that rests higher up, against the top rim of the large stone ear. When he lights it, he sees that the pages are still blank, that for some reason the pen had held onto its ink. He knows the reason. Allah doesn't want him to.<sup>61</sup>

Casa's interpretation puts an immediate end to his attempts to go back over his life. The endeavour is applauded nevertheless and once again Aslam invokes the Freudian notion of the Mystic Writing Pad, where an impression is always left even if the words can no longer be detected. In addition, a strong sense emanates from the paragraph that the mere act of recording is enough, that it does not matter if the words are invisible because they are there in the form of the pressure that has been applied to the blank page or even that they are there because, for a moment, the man holding the pen wished them to be. Aslam returns again and again in his work to the idea of blindness and what can be seen without eyes. Indeed when writing about Rohan in *The Blind Man's Garden* he made himself blind, to explore how sightlessness does not mean lack of sight:

The book took four and a half years to write and I thought I have no material to write about blindness. I thought to myself that I will just have to tape up my eyes and do it myself. So that is what I did for a week, and for a week for each of the following three years. I think the experience of

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 377-378.

those weeks informed the entire novel. I noticed when I was editing the book that everyone is reaching out their hands, trying to touch things, to smell things, trying to memorize things or looking at things as though for the first time. It was the first thing I noticed when I took the tape off my eyes. The first thing I noticed when I was standing in front of the mirror was that I was covered in bruises.<sup>62</sup>

It stretches the notion of the palimpsest, but not too far, to suggest that in 'trying to memorize things or looking at things as though for the first time', Aslam is using the body as the re-written manuscript, layers of text marked in the form of the bruises it sustains. To that extent the notion of the body as palimpsest reconnects with the idea of trauma's trace left on the body by the attritional force of history, discussed in the first section of this chapter.

There is no hierarchy apparent between the legible and illegible word in Hamid, Shamsie and Aslam's work. For example, in the case of Casa's confession, it does not matter if it is read or not. He places the folded up blank sheet inside the giant stone Buddha's ear, the Buddha that at the end of the novel is airlifted by helicopter and taken to the National Museum in Kabul where it, and Casa's presumably seen or unseen confessional, will be official exhibits in perpetuity. What appears to count is the act of writing, not whether it is read; the written word that has integrity, not the text that is vacuous or facile. The dialogic riposte to Erica's unfinished novel is of course the trio of completed novels analyzed here; in a fugal rejoinder to the suggestion that it is unimportant if a word is 'witnessed' or not, the word itself is given sacred status and huge efforts are made to safeguard it if possible. In *Burnt Shadows*, Konrad constructs a wire mobile in order to hang his precious eight notebooks from it. The notebooks are depicted as winged birds, splayed open:

He climbed over the wall to the vacant property that adjoined his own, and attached the mobile to a tree. The wind twirled the purple-winged birds in the moonlight.

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<sup>62</sup> Nadeem Aslam interviewed on *Nightwaves*, BBC Radio 3, 6 February 2013.

He remains certain that no-one will think to enter the deserted garden to search for treachery amidst the leaves. The people who would willingly sift through every particle of dust in a house for signs of anti-state activity can always be deceived by a simple act of imagination.<sup>63</sup>

Books will always be unsafe in the hands of the tyrant. When Hiroko attempts to buy a replacement copy of *War and Peace* in Karachi, she is ordered to put it down by a man who says that Western books are 'the enemy of Islam.' The bookseller apologizes, saying that recently 'a group of young men with fresh beards came in and started to pull all the books off their shelves, looking at the covers for which were unIslamic.'<sup>64</sup>

The 'simple act of imagination' identified by Konrad is the final defence against tyranny, injustice, cruelty and totalitarianism. So the perfect defence against the tyranny of the Taliban is to imagine a way to defeat them. Katrina, whose mental collapse is total, still has the enduring sense that the written word must be defended and her solution is ingenious:

at a point when the Taliban could have raided the house any day, Marcus's wife had nailed the books overhead in these rooms and corridors. Original thought was heresy to the Taliban and they would have burned the books. And this was the only way that suggested itself to the woman, she whose mental deterioration was complete by then, to save them, to put them out of harm's reach.<sup>65</sup>

At the start of *Burnt Shadows*, Konrad describes to Hiroko seeing a name in the river. The name has been 'written in red ink by someone – either a skilled artist or an obsessed lover – who knew how to paint on the water in the instant the ice froze the characters into place.'<sup>66</sup>

Much later, that frozen writing is invoked once again. Hiroko is thinking about her stillborn daughter, damaged in terrible ways by the effects of radiation. 'She

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<sup>63</sup> Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows*, p. 9.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>65</sup> Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil*, p. 11.

<sup>66</sup> Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows*, p. 17.

would have been thirty-five now. ... If the first had been born – Hiroko thought of her as Hana after the bright-red name Konrad had seen frozen beneath the ice – there would have been no Raza. Somehow she knew that to be true.<sup>67</sup> The frozen writing has become more than letters, it has become a testament to a life too, albeit a traumatized one. But there is always a rivalry between the act of imagination in the written word and the symbol of tyranny represented by the birds of prey that were first scorched into her skin by the Nagasaki bomb. The birds entered her body, ‘their beaks dripping venom into her bloodstream, their charred wings engulfing her organs. But then her daughter died, and the dreams stopped. The birds had their prey.’<sup>68</sup> There is an overbearing sense of a contest between the sanctity of the written word, and the birds.

A more sophisticated, subtle contest emerges too, between the proscriptive tendency to insist upon absolute meanings and the multi-faceted interpretations offered by the palimpsest. As Aslam has said, ‘The advantage of being a novelist is that novels don’t tell you what to think, they tell you what to think *about*.’<sup>69</sup> I would also argue that in his quest to provoke thought, he appears to have a sense in which he is himself a palimpsest; the text on the manuscript may be the same, but the reading of it will be different, dependent upon the beholder. He appears to have no particular complaints about this, although he finds it worth noting:

When *The Wasted Vigil* was published I ended up giving readings in New York and Lahore within a week, the way my schedule worked out. So in New York after my reading somebody stood up and said you are a pro-Jihadi, you approve of the 9/11 attacks from what you are saying and from what you have just read. It is clear that you approve of terrorism. The following week I went to Lahore and somebody stood up and said from what you are saying and from what you have read it is clear that you are a CIA agent and that you have been paid by Western governments to malign Islam and Pakistan.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>69</sup> Nadeem Aslam interviewed on *Nightwaves*, BBC Radio 3, 6 February 2013.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

In the concluding section of this chapter I analyze the extent to which these writers' are successful in taking both these points of view. Do they succeed, like Janus, in looking both ways at once, unlike the readers in Lahore and New York whose gaze was in one direction only?

### Part Three: The Janus view

Henry Kissinger's analysis of what he called the 'American foreign policy trauma' in the 1960s and 70s was that it applied 'valid principles to unsuitable conditions'<sup>71</sup>. His comment is blackly comic in its evasion of responsibility and condenses perfectly the polarized positions depicted in these novels: the solution is correct, but the problem is at fault. Characters are predominantly representative of one viewpoint, rather than two. A distinction can be made in terms of all three writers' depiction or presentation of themselves, however. In this regard, Aslam, until recently a non-practicing Muslim, has redrawn himself as a follower of Islam:

Before 9/11 if someone had asked me are you a Muslim I would have said not really in that I don't pray, I don't fast and I can't imagine a time in my life when I would need the idea of God in my life. And so I would say no. But after 9/11 if someone asked me are you a Muslim I would say yes I am in that now it has become important to send a message that this too is a Muslim and this message is not just directed at the bigots in the West, it is directed also at people like Al Qaeda, it is me saying to them that I refuse to accept that you are the one who will define what a Muslim is.<sup>72</sup>

Mohsin Hamid also has a sense in which *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* stems from his own divided conversation with himself. Shamsie too has spoken of

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<sup>71</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Guardian*, 16 December 1992.

<sup>72</sup> Nadeem Aslam, interviewed on *The Strand*, BBC World Service, 6 February 2013.

being able to see 'two Americas.' The pluralism that all three writers' embrace is nevertheless moderated by signs that they elect to hand out ritualized violent justice to those they judge to be taking the moral high ground unjustifiably. Shamsie, in particular, appears to want to adjust the weights in the scale, to take account of what America failed to recognize on 10 September 2001:

The United States is so used to seeing itself largely as a country that was different on September 12<sup>th</sup> 2001.<sup>73</sup> Americans were asking themselves 'why do they hate us?' The fact that they don't have an answer to that question is a failure of fiction writers. Where was the novel putting the United States in the world? Growing up in Pakistan in the 1980s as I did, I was much more aware of America's place in the world than the US itself was. When I went to an American university, there was a blindness to what the US was doing to nations like mine.<sup>74</sup>

Shamsie's work is, in part, an attempt to cut through the fog of US national paranoia. However, does this instinct to re-distribute history's villains and victims constitute a form of retribution or even of 'torture-porn', the term used by Roger Luckhurst in *The Trauma Question*? Luckhurst argues that:

Critics and film-makers of torture-porn inevitably reference 9/11 or Abu Ghraib as the traumas of their time in the American polity. [...] What releases are found in the ecstatic cinematic demolition of body, memory and self? These might not be engagements with the trauma paradigm so much as attempts to transcend its legacies of burdened history and compromised, damaged selves.<sup>75</sup>

Luckhurst's suggestion that such attempts are somehow the means by which a form of victory can be declared over either the trauma or the perceived aggressor or perhaps both, has some resonance when applied to Shamsie's approach. She is conscious, when writing fictionally, that somehow the odds must be evened up in favour of the non-American. In some ways, America itself

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<sup>73</sup> An example of this can be found in the title of the award-winning television documentary *102 minutes That Changed America*.

<sup>74</sup> KS interviewed by CLP, May 2009.

<sup>75</sup> Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 206.



must be 'transcended'. Luckhurst goes on to cite Elaine Scarry's argument that in societies where there is

a crisis of belief – that is, when some central idea or ideology or cultural construct has ceased to elicit a population's belief either because it is manifestly fictitious or because it has for some reason been divested of ordinary forms of substantiation - the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of 'realness' and 'certainty'.<sup>76</sup>

So, could it be argued that Shamsie and Aslam are both suggesting that those who engage in torture in their novels have indeed had their ideologies 'divested of ordinary forms of substantiation'? Certainly Shamsie believes that the USA, if not 'divested of ordinary forms of substantiation', did construct the notional ideology of The War on Terror, in order to invent the necessity to respond to it:

The War on Terror was a terrible phrase. It was wide ranging enough for them to place any nation within that context and therefore to say 'we have the right to attack you because of 9/11. 9/11 was used as *carte blanche* whenever and wherever we see enemies. The irony was that no nation state actually *did* it.'<sup>77</sup>

Aslam and to an extent Hamid make repeated references to the abuses of human rights and contraventions of the Geneva Convention indulged in by the West in order to facilitate their right to that 'carte blanche'. This could legitimately be regarded as the divesting of 'ordinary forms of substantiation' described by Scarry and their replacement with illegal methods of control in order to promote the aura of 'realness and certainty'.

Let us examine those who indulge in torture in both writers' work. In *Burnt Shadows*, torture can be laid at the door of the Americans in Nagasaki, certainly. The CIA agent Harry Burton admits to torturing Gul Rasool using the technique of water-boarding, to elicit information about Zameen. These

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<sup>76</sup> Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p. 14.

<sup>77</sup> Kamila Shamsie interviewed by CLP.

instances certainly fit the model. However, it is also possible that one of the Third Country Nationals, employed by Harry Burton, assassinates him, thereby turning the 'illegal methods of control' back onto the United States. This does not apparently fit Shamsie's model, although it is certainly what she has Harry's corrupt American colleague Steve warn will happen. But when I asked Shamsie why she had elected to have one of the Third Country Nationals murder Harry, she explicitly denied that a national from a third country had committed the crime:

Is Steve correct? No. It's not one of Harry's guys who kills him. I think Harry's vision is damaged and he himself endangers his own vision. The Third Country Nationals who come to work in Afghanistan, they do *not* turn on the Americans. Steve's whole prejudice is that if they are Muslim they are inevitably on the other side.<sup>78</sup>

So I asked her if she found it risky to have the Third Country Nationals at least implicated in the death of Harry. She paused to think but was unequivocal in her answer and indeed was at pains to correct any impression that the reader might have that a Third World National was responsible:

Do I have anxieties about Harry being shot? Well, I certainly wouldn't want one of the Third Country Nationals to turn their guns on him. They are there because of economic necessity.<sup>79</sup>

Odd though it may seem that Shamsie appears to be speculating about her own plot, to the extent that in retrospect she virtually enters into conversation with herself, she is at least quite clear in admitting to being highly selective in her choice of culprits. The balance is quite deliberately stacked against nationalistic Americans in the novel. Sajjad is somehow deemed to be entitled to say that 'atrocities committed on Muslims touched him far more deeply than atrocities committed by Muslims'.<sup>80</sup> But Harry appears to be implicitly criticized when he thinks about the facts of 9/11:

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows*, p. 88.

he was entirely unsurprised by 9/11 – had, in fact, assumed a jihadi connection to the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 – but he was also stunned by his reaction to it, the depth of his fury, the wish for all the world to stop and weep with him for the city which had adopted him when he was eleven. He was in the Democratic Republic of the Congo at the time, overseeing the setting up of Arkwright and Glenn's operation to provide security for a Belgian diamond-export company, and was well aware of how disproportionate his attitude must seem in a country which had lost more than two and a half million people in a war which seemed to have pauses rather than an end. He sat down with a calculator on 12 September, and worked it out to more than two thousand deaths a day, each day, for over three years – but he couldn't find any way to connect those numbers to his emotions.<sup>81</sup>

Much earlier in the novel, Hiroko breaks from the Americans for whom she has been working after the war as a translator. The explicit statement from one of them that Hiroko's injuries in the Nagasaki bombing were effectively 'worth it' is what provokes the break:

And then one day – near the end of '46 – the American with the gentle face said the bomb was a terrible thing, but it had to be done to save American lives. I knew straight away I couldn't keep working for them.<sup>82</sup>

That distinction between the American view and the voice of reason is reiterated at the close of the novel. Kim, Harry's daughter, argues with Hiroko, claiming that the only reason Nagasaki is significant is because it 'happened' to Hiroko. Hiroko's furious response, which makes an entirely unconvincing apologia for Kim at the same time because Shamsie needs us to like her, follows the same trajectory as the earlier reference to the Nagasaki attack:

In the big picture of the Second World War, what was seventy-five thousand more Japanese dead? Acceptable, that's what it was. In the

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 271.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

big picture of threats to America, what is one Afghan? Expendable. Maybe he's guilty, maybe not. Why risk it? Kim, you are the kindest, most generous woman I know. But right now, because of you, I understand for the first time how nations can applaud when their governments drop a second nuclear bomb.<sup>83</sup>

I would take issue with the suggestion that Kim has ever displayed either kindness or generosity. There is no evidence for that claim in the text. But Shamsie asserts those qualities in order to temper the harshness of the claim that she wants to make, that America is willing to sacrifice countless lives for its own pragmatic reasons. Interestingly, the idea that 'nations can applaud when their governments drop a second nuclear bomb' is a nod, conscious or otherwise, towards the character Changez in Mohsin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. He smiles when he hears for the first time that New York has been assaulted by the attacks of 9/11.

Even the Taliban in *Burnt Shadows* appear to resist the worst indulgences of the Americans, merely sending Raza on his way when he fails to do his duty as a putative terrorist with an effective cuff around the head and an indulgent smile. And when Raza allows himself to be wrongfully arrested in Abdullah's place and taken to Guantanamo, Shamsie argues that 'he's finally done the right thing.' Her rationale for that is that he 'owes Abdullah a great deal', a claim once again that I find little evidence for in the text. But in the quasi-torture scene in which Kim erroneously judges that Abdullah has 'tortured' that symbol of the indulged Western child, the teddy bear, by driving over a consignment of them in the road, we are provided with further evidence that torture is either something dished out by the Americans, or falsely and censoriously assumed to have been dished out by an Afghani to something entirely meaningless - an insentient fluffy toy.

All three writers are part of a close-knit group of Pakistani writers and each is familiar with the other's work. Hamid spent part of his childhood in America and returned as an adult to study and work there. Shamsie has spent some time in the USA, but Aslam has not. Even though Shamsie noted that 'Mohsin seems

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 362.

to feel more American than me' (although he is currently living in Pakistan again), where I would argue that all three novels share a remarkable similarity and at the same time fail badly in their depiction and characterization of The Man from the CIA. In Shamsie's and Aslam's novels there are not many variations on the CIA theme. There is the bad CIA man and the not-quite-so-bad CIA man. Harry Burton falls into the not-so-bad category. Shamsie's Steve and Aslam's James Palantine and David Town are the resolutely bad variety. Hamid never identifies precisely who Changez' listener is, but one clear option is that he is a CIA operative of the David Town type.

Put simply, Harry Burton and David Town could walk into each other's novels and take each other's place; nothing much would change. Indeed David Town literally does walk out of one novel and into another. I do not know if Aslam is aware of this, but rather like Wally who makes repeated entrances in Richard Ford's *Sportswriter* trilogy, seemingly without Ford realising it, David Town appears in Aslam's work twice too. He is the CIA operative who dies in *The Wasted Vigil* and, with the identical name, he is the US government employee who orders the torture of Mikal in *The Blind Man's Garden*. Deliberate or inadvertent, his resolutely American name and his metronomic dialogue, is evidence enough of what we might at the very least call a lack of effort in characterization from Aslam. Shamsie's Steve too, who frames Raza for the murder of Harry, could quite easily stray from *Burnt Shadows* and stroll into *The Wasted Vigil*, taking the place of the torturer James Palantine. Their smugness, sanctimony, unimaginative names (James even shares his name with Harry's own father), their American attitudes, their machismo, their distorted view of the world order are interchangeable. David Town Number 1, who claims to be a dealer in gems, was in New York in 1993 when Islamic terrorists attempted to blow up the World Trade Center for the first time. David was brought up at a time when 'a hatred and fear of Communism was in the air an American child breathed.' And there was also the issue of his older brother Jonathan's death in Vietnam. We are told that because the Soviet Union had supported Vietnamese guerrillas, David believed the Soviets bore responsibility for Jonathan's death:

for the rest of my life I am going to do everything I can to fuck up the Reds.

But that was then. By the time he came to Peshawar as an employee of the CIA his opposition to Communism was the result of study and contemplation. Not something that grew out of a personal wound.

He was in Peshawar as a believer.<sup>84</sup>

Much ground is covered here. David is both an ideological and a pragmatic CIA man, with both personal and public reasons for what is presented as his prejudices. And he has the burning irrationalism of a 'believer.'

Kamila Shamsie's Harry Burton is a David Town clone. The market scene, when fatefully Harry is witnessed giving his shoes to Raza, is a moment for Shamsie to state that 'of course, every Pakistani assumed that all Americans in their country were CIA operatives.'<sup>85</sup> The unintentional irony of course is that in Kamila Shamsie's fictional territory, all Americans in Pakistan *are* CIA operatives.

We never learn Hamid's character's name but it is surely a safe bet to assume he is a Tom, Chuck or John. It does not matter. Named or unnamed, he is no more nor less of a character than Harry/David1/David2/James/Steve. Hamid's statement that 'It seems an obvious thing to say but you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all undercover assassins'<sup>86</sup> is the perfect rejoinder to Shamsie's inclusion of the line that 'of course, every Pakistani assumed that all Americans in their country were CIA operatives.' However, by this stage of the novel, not only do we assume that Changez believes that he is talking to a man from the CIA, so too do we. So when Changez asks 'why are you reaching into your jacket sir? I detect a glint of metal. Given that you and I are now bound by a certain shared intimacy, I trust it is from the holder of your business cards'<sup>87</sup>, it is reasonably clear that it is a gun that he sees. If it is, then Changez and his listener's fates are identical to those of Aslam's David and Casa. And just as it

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<sup>84</sup> Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil*, p. 153.

<sup>85</sup> Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows*, p. 162.

<sup>86</sup> Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, p. 183.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

is likely that Changez and his listener die as intransigently opposed to each other's views but still attempting to effect a conversion, David Number 1 dies, still trying to turn Casa:

David's mouth is next to Casa's ear, and he is whispering something fast. He is hoping to win over his murderer with an embrace.

They have fallen backwards on the earth. Managing to free his right hand from David's grip, Casa feels along the belt tied to the waist. Through gritted teeth he says something, his face parallel with the sky visible through a gap in the foliage. The last words David hears.

The blast opens a shared grave for them on the ground.<sup>88</sup>

Shamsie's Harry Burton too, dies in similar fashion, shot by someone whose views he loathes.

I interviewed Kamila Shamsie after Barack Obama signed an executive order to shut down the US detention centre in Guantanamo Bay on 22 January 2009, two days after he was inaugurated as president. He announced that it 'will be closed no later than one year from now.' When I asked Shamsie how she thought that announcement would impact upon the fate of her character Raza, falsely imprisoned in Guantanamo, she said that she experienced 'a sense of relief' and that her 'response was to the real world, not to the fictional world':

The day Barack Obama announced that he would be closing Guantanamo, my father said to me 'well, that changes the end of your novel, doesn't it?' But the thing is that I didn't know that it would end that way. There was going to be a *deus ex machina* and it was all going to be OK. I wrote the end of the chapter when Kim and Hiroko get the phone call and I realized that it was the end. And it was a very disturbing moment for me. Really, what was Kim going to be able to do? The possibility is that people are going to be released from Guantanamo, but one option is that he is going to stay there.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil*, pp. 422-423.

<sup>89</sup> KS interviewed by CLP.

The irony is that four years on from Barack Obama's executive order, Guantanamo is still open and still has inmates; at the time of writing there are said to be more than 160 prisoners still being held there. There is no evidence to suggest that it will close any time soon, or possibly even at all. So Shamsie was misled in her 'sense of relief' and in her 'response to the real world'. Her character Raza is still in Guantanamo.

All three writers have a shared, slightly unusual relationship with the real and with real-life events. There is a sense in which they engage in a literary tug-of-war with contemporary history, attempting to manipulate its course and its consequences. When I asked Shamsie what results she hoped there would be from publishing such a highly politicized novel, her answer was unequivocal. She said she had no great ambitions for her prose in terms of its power to alter the facts, but she does have a mission to reinterpret, trying to add complexity to the narrative by corralling the history of the second half of the twentieth century and redefining it. In other words she is providing her own palimpsest of history, the endlessly rewritten and imprecise manuscript so mistrusted by Foer but embraced by Aslam:

I don't write because it changes things but because it bears witness. News journalism by its very nature can only report what happened yesterday. How can it reflect 50 years? It does a very different thing. Look at *The Wasted Vigil* for example. It says 'here are the layers, the complexities and the inter-twinings', so that it's no longer possible to say that 9/11 is when it started. Let's see if 1979 and the presence of the Soviets in Afghanistan is when it started. Fiction creates stories which add nuance. News journalism fulfils one function and novels which are powered by circumstances and empathy, do something else. Novels allow you to imagine yourself on other sides of history.<sup>90</sup>

She went on to state that:

The point about being a fiction writer is that we are making up stuff all the time, but it's not the truth. The real problem comes with the idea of the

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<sup>90</sup> KS interviewed by CLP.



singular truth anyway. There are multiple, multiple, multiple truths. But now we have a situation where different truths are colliding with each other.<sup>91</sup>

In any event, it cannot be said that the 'real world' of news journalism has defended for itself a corner of territory where the facts will be examined, protected and above all unambiguous. Certainly Aslam sees it as his fictional duty to examine the facts, in other words to act as a journalist should:

I always say that the news is the most emotional programme on TV. I don't know how people who are not writers can sit down and watch the news and not be disturbed by what they are seeing. So for me, to see something on the news, one way for me not to be completely destroyed by the injustice that I see is to say that I will write about this. I will write and investigate what is happening here and so you start to write systematically about it.<sup>92</sup>

This free flow of methods and material between novelist and journalist continues to be productive for fiction, although rarely for journalism which is sentimentalized and trivialized by its dalliances with fiction. As a perhaps trivial example, in the immediate aftermath of the spy swap between the USA and Russia that took place in Vienna in July 2010, the BBC made a perverse editorial decision to channel the real through the fictional, by asking the thriller writer John le Carré if this spy story 'would make a very good novel.'<sup>93</sup> His answer incidentally, was 'no, I think it would make a very poor story.' It is worth resurrecting at this point the difficulties faced by Richard Ford in responding journalistically to the thousands of deaths on 9/11 and the children affected by those deaths. As discussed in Chapter 1, his uncharacteristically weak and unconvincing prose, transacted via a flimsy fictional trope of everlasting life,

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Nadeem Aslam, interviewed on *Nightwaves*, BBC Radio 3, 6 February 2013.

<sup>93</sup> John le Carré, interviewed by Shaun Ley on *The World This Weekend*, BBC Radio 4, 11 July 2010.

invoked the unstable idea that the dead live on 'in all but the most literal ways.'<sup>94</sup> As journalism it failed and it made a very poor story too.

Possibly, Aslam has found a method of surmounting the barrier that prevents journalism from offering false comfort and renders fiction falsely consoling. Aslam concludes the final paragraph of *The Blind Man's Garden* by returning to the mythic lexicon settled upon by Shamsie in her depiction of Hiroko. Mikal, returned from the dead once, surely cannot do it a second time, despite Naheed's longing:

She looks up from the page she has been reading just as the gate opens to admit Mikal. Perhaps it is his ghost, here to convince her to continue with life without him. He raises his hand slowly and she stands up and walks towards him, her own hand held out. The insects weave a gauze of sound in the air. She moves towards him and her eyes are full of a still intensity – as though aware of the unnamed, unseen forces in the world, and attempting in her mind to name and see them.<sup>95</sup>

It is Aslam's triumph that he does not coax the reader into thinking that Mikal really has returned from the dead; not only that, but he finally coaxes Richard Ford's halting, pedestrian words into life, that it is possible to 'live on in all but the most literal ways.' There is also a tacit connection here with the conclusions drawn by Tim Armstrong in response to the final paragraphs of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*:

By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Richard Ford, 'The Attack Took More Than The Victims' Lives. It Took Their Deaths', *New York Times Magazine*, 23 September 2001.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/23/magazine/23VWLN.html>> [accessed 22 February 2013].

<sup>95</sup> Aslam, *The Blind Man's Garden*, p. 409.

<sup>96</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987; London: Picador, 1988) p. 275.

Armstrong's argument is that in her ambiguous conclusion 'Morrison seems to imply that 'weather' represents something beyond a traumatic legacy. Weather is the everyday rather than that which haunts; it is lived experience rather than the melancholy burden of the past.'<sup>97</sup> There is an aura of the 'lived experience' in Aslam's words too, as well as plenty of ambiguity of course; so too does he avoid the 'melancholy burden of the past' eschewed by Morrison. The writer so avowedly enmeshed by history and for whom 'history is the third parent', appears to have liberated his characters Naheed and Mikal at least from some of its worst entrapments.

In my final chapter I will develop the idea of the unequal contract between journalist and fiction writer in mediating 9/11, by looking at the work of an American news journalist who has turned her reporter's eye on the events of 9/11 and interpreted them fictionally. Exactly ten years after the 9/11 attacks, has the publication of Amy Waldman's novel demonstrated a new accommodation with history, allowing fiction to escape the at times faltering interpretive attempts made by Ford, Auster and DeLillo? Does Waldman's work *The Submission* herald a new forward-looking trajectory for the 9/11 novel?

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<sup>97</sup> Armstrong, *The Logic of Slavery*, p. 174.

## CHAPTER 5: *THE SUBMISSION*: THE END OF THE DECADE

### Introduction

the novel should [...] introduce chaos to order. It should make you question the reality before you

Amy Waldman

Almost ten years to the day since the 9/11 assaults, American journalist Amy Waldman published her début novel, *The Submission*. Her work explores the grotesque repercussions of a competition to design New York's 9/11 memorial garden. In an anonymous selection process and after much acrimony, the jury settles on the winning design. The jury member most wedded to that choice is the widow of a man killed as the Twin Towers collapsed. When the identity of the winner is finally plucked from the envelope, the jury's anagnorisis is the revelation that he is an architect called Mohammad Khan; his name alone establishes him in their minds not as a victor but as a political catastrophe. The ensuing recriminations, arguments and fatal violence are both fuelled and distorted by the journalists who report the story.

As a former reporter for *The New York Times* and its one-time New Delhi bureau co-chief, Amy Waldman was the first news journalist to chronicle in fiction the explicit role that journalism played in the aftermath of the tragedy. The fact that she was a journalist writing counter-factually about a political drama reported by fictional journalists who inflamed the exigencies of that crisis, brings a revelatory acuity to the narrative.

Waldman's *détournement*, in which the journalist unpicks the tropes of journalism, has echoes of Nathaniel West's 1933 novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and

Waugh's 1938 work *Scoop*. However, in Waldman's hands it is not just the daily trade of the reporter that becomes such an ugly spectacle, but those of the historian, the politician, the political activist and the professional committee member too. It is by consistently underscoring the apparent limitations of the alternative narratives, in particular that of 'authentic' history, that she spreads the weight of her attacks. In her view, not only is the quasi-reality of established history as flawed and inadequate as the versions of the facts propounded by news journalists, it has, in its illusion of solidity, even greater limitations. As Waldman defined it, in an interview with me, 'The problem is that history doesn't exist outside of our record of it ... one of the values of fiction is that it can hint at, or force us to imagine, the history that exists outside the official record...' Waldman's suspicion of official histories is perhaps not surprising given her experience as a journalist. It is a version of history identified by Robert Eaglestone as one in which:

The metaphysics of comprehension can be understood as both the desire for and the methods by and through which Western thought, in many different ways, comprehends, seizes, or consumes what is other to it and so reduces the other to itself, to the same.<sup>1</sup>

Waldman's point seems to be that fictional discourse holds the potential to be something other than or in addition to, not merely 'the same', as she would argue history is. It is a contentious claim. Why should fiction escape what Eaglestone calls the 'metaphysics of comprehension'? It is, in addition, a claim that is stated rather baldly in the interview; the question of whether that potential is realized in her book is what we will have to consider.

Initially the signs are not good. Waldman's writing has a schematic quality, and her characters lack subtle or defining characteristics; it is not a promising start for an artistic endeavour that has set itself the task of being 'other than', not merely 'the same'. There are few, if any, characters in her novel without ambition, hubris or vanity. Their contesting claims and desires set up classically oppositional positions like those so often found in news reporting; intersecting

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) p. 4.

demands and expectations propel the action. One character desires something, another attempts to prevent it. One character argues he is right, another demonstrates he is wrong. On the periphery of these debates there are personalities who are capable of acting in a dispassionate or disinterested manner, but most, if not all, are depicted programmatically as motivated by desire for personal gain, fame, notoriety or their place in history.

Since her characters are obeying the journalist's classic imperative of countering right with wrong or pitching guilt against innocence, it is possible to see Waldman's intricate interplay of binary forces as uncomfortably close to the kind of 'us against them' novel reviled by Kristiaan Versluys in his analysis of 9/11 fiction, *Out of the Blue*. In this work he argues that what he calls the 'us-versus-them' fiction, or what Eric Santner decried as 'narrative fetishism', is a betrayal of the art of the novel itself. The 'us-versus-them' novel is a narrative that Versluys reviles as merely providing the 'occasion for a conversion: from a sinful or worldly attitude to a religious and pious one or from lukewarm citizenship to flag-waving patriotism. The terrorist attacks ... are shamelessly recuperated for ideological and propaganda purposes.'<sup>2</sup> In this category Versluys places novels by Charlotte Vale Allen, Rick Amburgey and Karen Kingsbury.

It is worth noting that this binary literary response could be viewed as a microcosmic version of the binary, polarized vision promulgated by the Bush administration at the time of the 9/11 attacks: you are either with us or against us. 'Us-versus-them' is of course an acronymic double-entendre of the 'U.S. against them'. By contrast, Versluys commends those works that abandon the 'bland polarity' of the binary and seek instead 'a triangulating discourse':

The novelistic practice of viewing a situation in its full complexity entails the denial of the reductive logic of terrorism, the black-and-white ideological view that legitimates indiscriminate violence. It equally goes against the simplifications of patriotic rodomontade and revanchist rhetoric. In embracing the viewpoint of the Other (including the terrorist, the ultimate

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<sup>2</sup> Kristiaan Versluys, *Out of the Blue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 13.

Other), novelists employ an ethics that gainsays binary thinking and that, in potentia, proffers a way out of the deadly spiral of violence and counterviolence that the planes, coming out of the blue, initiated.<sup>3</sup>

This itself seems a little black and white, to use Versluys' own phrase, since the novel may incorporate, as Bakhtin taught us, competing discourses and ideologies without resorting to the 'bland polarity' that Versluys complains of. In this chapter I will elaborate on my definition of Waldman's narrative as more than simply binary and subtly different from 'triangulating' but rather as an oscillating geometric work, endlessly pairing each statement, each viewpoint with a counter statement or a counter viewpoint, and thus offering an analysis of competing claims. 'Us-versus-them' becomes in Waldman's hands something more interesting and subtle than Versluys' 'bland polarity'. It is not dialectical, since its clear intent is not to seek to reach any verifiable 'truth'. Rather, her oscillatory approach leads to an intricate web of responses to 9/11 that explicitly finds no victor and no vanquished. This geometric pattern is itself an aspect of Waldman's 9/11 thesis that no single character should be allowed to take precedence over another in terms of motivations or justifications. In counterpoint to the forceful geometry of Mohammad Khan's memorial garden design that bifurcates and quadfurcates everything and everyone before it, Waldman has devised a series of confrontations that deliver not harmony and balance, but what she described in her interview with me as a process of bringing 'chaos to order'. An important question that must be considered, however, is whether in bringing chaos, Waldman manages to prise her novel out of the territory of the fortifying homeland or, as Richard Gray put it, 'the security of fortress America.'<sup>4</sup>

The quest to bring 'chaos to order' is achieved in part by the narrative's ambivalence about the process of memorialization. On the one hand, the novel centres on the process of choosing a designer for New York's memorial garden and yet, on the other, the process itself is the means by which chaos re-enters the city's frame. The garden in *The Submission* is therefore both a narrative

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), p. 17.

provocateur as well as the source of restraint and harmony, a motif familiar from the seventeenth century onwards and prominent in Islamic tradition.<sup>5</sup> It is, interestingly, a method deployed by Nadeem Aslam, whose eponymous garden in his 2013 novel *The Blind Man's Garden* is a metaphor for Pakistan itself. In his depiction of the garden he attempts to wrest back some of 'the glorious moments of Islam's past' and to bring a sense of order via the topography of the garden:

if the reader wishes to pick up the clues, to me the garden is Pakistan. At one point I say 'the boundary wall is draped by poets' jasmine and that is Pakistan's national flower. So if you know these things, you can pick it up and in a way the book traces the history of Pakistan, a country based on the notions of having an Islamic state and then what happened to it - how Islam was hijacked... I think all my novels end on a hopeful moment. Towards the end of that novel we are ...in the garden again but the garden is now full of children. We can't tell you who those children belong to but I think it is enough.<sup>6</sup>

Is the order of the garden envisaged by both Waldman, and Aslam, merely an aspiration, or can a work of art have a salving power, whether it is a garden, a novel, a sculpture or a piece of music? Waldman was typically ambivalent in her response; gardens bring both order and chaos simultaneously:

I was very interested in the way gardens came to represent both philosophical and practical order. I think there are parallels to the novel, which can salve by ordering reality — except that the novel should also, on some level, introduce chaos to order. It should make you question the reality before you, should unsettle you on some level.<sup>7</sup>

I will explore in this chapter how Waldman has used the notion of bringing 'chaos to order' to construct her own memorial to 9/11, since that is, in part, what her novel turns out to be.

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<sup>5</sup> I am thinking here of novels such as *The Italian* (1797), in which order is restored as the protagonists leave the savage landscape of Naples and enter an English garden.

<sup>6</sup> Nadeem Aslam interviewed on *Night Waves*, BBC Radio 3, 6 February 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Amy Waldman interviewed by Charlie Lee-Potter, December 2011.



Arguably, the most important distinction between this novel and those I have analyzed thus far is to be found in its temporal focus. Richard Ford elected to write about 9/11 by stepping sideways and nudging our attention towards it; Jonathan Safran Foer's modus operandi was to reverse time, to urge it backwards to the point before the attacks took place. This he did both narratively and photographically. Don DeLillo attempted to freeze time, as I outlined in a previous chapter. Mohsin Hamid too, in his choice to confine his novel within the second person present tense, devised a subtle, semiological means of freezing time. Paul Auster on the other hand, elected to explore a hyper-parallel episteme. As I will elucidate in this chapter, it has taken a decade for a novelist to push the narrative forward into the future tense. Amy Waldman does not deny time, reverse time, freeze it or reinvent it. Instead, she concludes her novel twenty years in the future. However, despite her attempt to envisage a future in which the crisis has been surmounted and catastrophe survived, Waldman is still not immune to the lure of what Richard Gray has called 'the seductive pieties of home, hearth and family and, related to them, the equally seductive myth of American exceptionalism.'<sup>8</sup>

Waldman describes the real 9/11 memorial as 'very powerful in its design, and yet it also seems, in scale, somehow disproportionate suggesting, somehow, that we can't move on from that moment, when in fact of course we already have.'<sup>9</sup> Waldman's proleptic approach serves to reinforce her assertion that 'we already have' moved on, and yet, in many ways, the landscape of her novel moves on to a post-crisis territory in which disaster has been survived and exceptionalism has been consolidated. This chapter, then, will assess the journalistic response, the process of memorialization and finally, Waldman's temporal approach. In examining her attitude to time and her conclusion that 'we already have' moved on, I will assess whether *The Submission* is the opening novel for the next decade or a work that repairs and reinstates the old myths.

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<sup>8</sup> Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11*, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> AW interviewed by CLP

## Part One: Journalism and History

Her addiction had progressed from reading the news, to reporting it, to breaking it, then – the crack cocaine of her business – to shaping it.

Amy Waldman, *The Submission*

If one were to use the reporter's tool of generalization, it would be simple to assume that all newspaper journalists are an amorphous mass, engaged in the same trade. There is, however, a defining hierarchy made up of 'reporters' of information at the bottom to 'definers' of information at the top. This is the hierarchy that separates the reporter from the columnist. As one might expect of a news reporter turned novelist, Waldman draws narrative meaning from these distinctions.

One of the novel's principal characters, journalist Alyssa Spier, is propelled from the ranks of the mere reporter into the rarefied territory of the newspaper columnist. It is her reward for revealing that the hitherto secret winner of the memorial contest is a Muslim. By 'earning' a column, Spier is granted the entitlement to declare what is 'true'. Alyssa, we are told, 'had no ideology, believed only in information, which she obtained, traded, peddled, packaged, and published, and she opposed any effort to doctor her product.'<sup>10</sup> The change of status from reporter to columnist brings with it the right to be declarative and

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<sup>10</sup> Amy Waldman, *The Submission* (London: William Heinemann, 2011), p. 60. All subsequent references are to this edition.

the expectation that the audience will be more compliant in believing those declarations.

Having won the prized column, Alyssa Spier receives instructions from Chaz, her new editor, on what she now needs to deliver in exchange for her prize. Yes, she can declare her version of the truth, but she must not equivocate and she can only write about Mohammad Khan's disputed selection as the designer of the memorial garden:

The most important quality in a good columnist, he explained, was certainty: "No 'he said, she said,' just 'I say.'" She should seem to have answers. "People want to be told what to think," he said, swilling his martini. "Or they want to be told that what they already think is right."<sup>11</sup>

Having progressed from reporter of news to a source of 'truth', Alyssa Spier has a difficulty. 'The initial column had been provocative enough to land her two more, but they lacked exclusives, lacked bombs.'<sup>12</sup> The conventional term for producing a story that no one else has, i.e. an 'exclusive', has additional layers of ironic meaning in this context. Alyssa Spier's work, along with that of the other journalists in the novel, is about shutting certain people out, 'excluding' them from the national debate. Ironic too is the choice of the word 'bombs' given the explosive nature of the material that Spier trades in.

When Spier's subsequent columns are deemed to be failures, Waldman turns to the rhetoric of drugs and drug dealing to explain the crisis Spier faces. It cannot be described as either sophisticated or imaginative prose, but it is efficient:

Like a junkie's, her addiction had progressed from reading the news, to reporting it, to breaking it, then – the crack cocaine of her business – to shaping it. Being it. The prospect of her supply being cut off triggered a cold sweat.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Waldman, *The Submission*, p.105.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

This is not the only time that Waldman extracts meaning from the drug user's lexicon. Just as the possibility of having her right withdrawn to 'shape' the news and even 'be' the news 'triggered a cold sweat', so the chance to manipulate others is addictively seductive:

Being a Columnist, trying to influence invisible masses, didn't suit her. But using information, insinuation, and the right line of questioning to rewire a woman in front of her eyes – that was a scary rush of a high.<sup>14</sup>

Alyssa Spier is one of the most morally corrupt and reprehensible characters in the novel. She craves the 'crack cocaine of her business'. And yet, in the ambivalent, even bizarre moral universe of the journalist, she is horrified by a fellow reporter's suggestion that if she cannot find an exclusive she should make something up. She deploys the language of the playground to express her disapproval. It is not that it would be deceitful, but to invent something in its entirety was not to play the game:

"That would be cheating," she said. "It's no fun, you know that. And once you start doing that, what's the point of doing this at all?"

His mouth turned up at one edge, like a wink. Good girl: she had passed the test. Ignoring the sound of the bedroom television and the woman watching it, she briefly let herself imagine a rekindled affair. That he then gave her a scrap to use only fed the dream. In their world, it qualified as a romantic gesture.<sup>15</sup>

That 'romantic gesture', that 'tip-off' is an offhand comment by Mohammad Khan while on a trip to Kabul attempting to win the contract to design the new American embassy. Alyssa tries to garner further information from widow and jury member Claire Burwell using this misleading tip-off. She 'felt no guilt about sharing only part of this story with Claire. Fabricating reality was criminal;

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.161.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp.158-159.

editing it, commonplace.’<sup>16</sup> Incidentally, Waldman points up contrasts between this form of ‘editing’ and the Islamic notion of *taqiya*, whereby some Muslims are entitled to hide their religious faith if they are perceived to be under threat because of it. *The Submission* includes a Western newspaper’s definition of *taqiya*, which equates it with dishonesty:

Islam also sanctions lying – the Islamic term for this is *taqiya* – to help the faith spread or to wage jihad. The Muslim who entered this memorial competition practiced *taqiya* by concealing his identity.<sup>17</sup>

However, Waldman redresses the balance with the *New Yorker*’s more dispassionate and accurate definition. The point is nevertheless made that the ‘editing’ of ‘reality’ can produce very different results:

[Khan’s] opponents claim, absurdly, that Muslims can’t be trusted because they have religious sanction to lie. This is a bald misrepresentation of the concept of *Taqiya*, by which Shiites who live under Sunni rule are allowed to disguise their beliefs to protect themselves.<sup>18</sup>

If proof were needed that Amy Waldman equates the moral universe of the news reporter with the no-less reprehensible realms of the lawyer, the politician and the historian, one need only examine the words of ‘the governor’s man, lawyer Bob Wilner, a member of the selection panel. He is both lawyer and politician and has no difficulty with the notion that the result of the vote on the memorial could be manipulated, now that it has emerged that the winner is, inconveniently, a Muslim. ‘The record of our proceedings is a fungible thing, Claire, and you know it.’<sup>19</sup>

The historian on the panel is implicated, too, in the bid to rewrite the truth. In a striking nod towards the notorious words of Karl Rove examined in a previous

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 132.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

chapter, he argues that it is irrelevant whether Claire's dead husband would be appalled by the committee's desire to retract their decision:

'But your husband's not alive, Claire, and that's why we're here.' ...  
 'History makes its own truths, new truths. It cannot be unwritten, we must acknowledge –'  
 'Nonsense,' she interrupted, in a tone that sounded more like  
 'Shut up.' 'Things-ideals-change only if we allow them to. And if we do, they've won.'<sup>20</sup>

I asked Waldman why she had so deliberately paralleled journalism's lack of respect for the truth with the casual approach to verisimilitude adopted by politicians and historians in her novel. There is, after all, no sense in Waldman's definition of events that historians or politicians are any more reliable than the fourth estate. Interestingly, she appears to invest fiction with the greater potential to act as the genuine record, although this is inevitably problematic:

The problem is that history doesn't exist outside of our record of it; or rather, the record made of history is the only way we can access it. To me one of the values of fiction is that it can hint at, or force us to imagine, the history that exists outside the official record, to make us see how partial and occluded our sense of any history is.<sup>21</sup>

Her definition of history is, of course, in part contradictory. She appears to be suggesting that because history is a 'record' it allows no alternative viewpoints to be included. Its claim to be definitive is, in Waldman's view, one of its weaknesses. She is seemingly of the view that the nuanced, layered approach that fiction is able to take, untrammelled by its need to be 'official', grants it greater status, greater weight. Waldman describes Alyssa as having 'no ideology', she believed 'only in information...' But Waldman also demonstrates in the novel that information itself is unreliable. Does she believe that there is such a thing as the absolute truth, either in journalism or anywhere else for that matter?

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> Amy Waldman interviewed by CLP.

Absolute truth, no; facts, yes. I don't subscribe to the notion that everyone's view of reality or history has equal validity. For all her moral reprehensibility, Alyssa has a democratic aspect to her — she's battling the 'gatekeepers' deciding what is important, or newsworthy, or proper for public consumption. In this aspect she is kind of an allegorical character — standing in, on some level, for blogs etc that have challenged elite power brokers — whether newspaper editors or those who have access to them — who historically have exercised control over the news.<sup>22</sup>

It is important to note that in her response, Waldman is not only building a hierarchy in which fiction trumps history, she also appears to be making a distinction between old and new journalism. Her apparent belief that for all her faults and for all her skill at embroidery and embellishment, Spier is at least challenging the 'elite power brokers' is very much open to question. Exchanging newspaper editors, who, historically, have controlled the news, for a new breed of oligarch, seems a pyrrhic victory indeed. That distinction aside, what sense are we to make of a profession that disapproves of total invention, but is happily engaged in embellishing, distorting and manipulating what few facts there are?

I would caution against viewing Alyssa as a stand-in for an entire profession, rather than as the individual character she is. She doesn't stand for 'journalism' any more than Mo, or Asma for that matter, stand for Islam. I wasn't interested in indicting all of journalism. I was interested in showing how the media itself is an actor in history, not just a recorder of it. I think reporters are inventing rules all the time — they have to. To report is itself a distortion, since you are choosing what to include, and exclude — any neat narrative is false, by definition, because it tries to make sense of a reality that often doesn't make sense itself. (Subjects of stories, incidentally, also embroider and embellish and exclude, making them complicit in whatever narrative gets constructed.) I also think reporters are engaged in a constant process of rationalizing about how they get subjects or sources to open up, what they promise about how

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

information will be used versus how it is used in practice, and so on.<sup>23</sup>

Oscar and Alyssa speak a ‘callous patois peculiar to reporters’<sup>24</sup>. It is a vocabulary that all journalists are familiar with, a form of language typified by the now notorious question, ‘Anyone here been raped and speak English?’ The former Newsweek journalist Edward Behr once said that he heard a BBC reporter shouting that question at hundreds of rescued European survivors of a siege at Stanleyville in eastern Congo in 1964. So emblematic did he think it, that he made it the title of his autobiography. Waldman makes much of that crass line of questioning. Instead of talking about a catastrophic fire, her characters talk about ‘the most fun they ever had’. A building collapse becomes, instead, a ‘great story’. Perspicaciously, Waldman describes these news stories not as ‘tragedies’ but as the reporters’ ‘quarries’. So is that ‘callous patois’ morally culpable or does Waldman view it as simply an efficient way of dealing with daily news – grading it, classing, prioritising it, but above all getting it first? Waldman commented:

I would argue that that patois is a way of emotionally dealing with the news, as well. My own experience in reporting on death, tragedy, etc. was that you have to shut down a part of yourself — you can't allow yourself to feel everything or you can't operate. Over time that hardening can become a permanent state — and the ‘callous patois’ many reporters speak in is a reflection of that.<sup>25</sup>

That ‘permanent state’ of limited emotion is, arguably, the attribute that allowed reporters to create a new journalistic genre, the *Portraits of Grief* series in *The New York Times*, analyzed in an earlier chapter. In Waldman’s fictional world, the *Portraits of Grief are Relatives’ Ruminations*, the alliterated, cosily crass name standing in ironic contrast to its cynical purpose:

Every reporter had a digital Rolodex of widows and widowers, parents and siblings of the dead, who could be called for a quote on the issue of

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Waldman, *The Submission*, p. 106.

<sup>25</sup> AW interviewed by CLP.



the day: the state of the site, the capture of an attack suspect, the torture of said suspect, compensation, conspiracy theories, the anniversaries of the attack (first one month, then six months, then yearly), the selling of offensive knickknacks depicting the destruction. Somehow the relatives always found something to say.<sup>26</sup>

It is by assessing the content of *Portraits of Grief* and of *Relatives' Ruminations* that Waldman makes a further distinction between 'true' accounts of real events, and fictional accounts of them. Just because victims have written about their own tragedies or recounted their own grief, does not mean the accounts are reliable. And this is the point at which, according to Waldman, fiction can expose a greater truth than any kind of journalism can:

almost all storytelling about the dead is sanitized. That's going to be true whether a reporter (bound by convention, or propriety, or fear of offending) or a relative tells the story. That's where fiction can come in – give you a glimpse of the often dirtier truth.<sup>27</sup>

The use of the word 'fiction' is perhaps unintentionally ironic here and it is fair to say that the 'often dirtier truth' is undeniably complex. No one is claiming that it is verifiable, but in Waldman's view it is something at least to be relied upon:

When it comes to the facts, fiction is less reliable, and should be. But when it comes to what facts mean, or suggest, or elide, when it comes to what goes unspoken when facts are recorded, or to the emotional tenor of a piece of history – yes, I would argue that fiction is more reliable.<sup>28</sup>

An illustration of what Waldman is gesturing towards here comes in the trajectory she traces from the point at which it is first reported that Mohammad Khan has won the competition, to the point when it is set in stone that he has created a 'martyrs' paradise'. That dialogic trajectory begins with a report by the *Times'* architecture critic. Its insidiously inflective headline is a perfect example

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<sup>26</sup> *The Submission*, p. 61.

<sup>27</sup> AW interviewed by CLP.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

of the means by which a journalist can place an idea in the public domain, without having to establish its veracity. “‘A lovely Garden – and an Islamic One?’”

The newspaper’s architecture critic establishes that the four quadrants of Khan’s garden, along with its walls, its ‘pavilion-paralleled gardens’, its water features, are in fact marks of the gardens built ‘across the Islamic world, from Spain to Iran, to India to Afghanistan, over a dozen or more centuries.’<sup>29</sup> The apparently docile question mark of the headline transmutes into a series of devastating insinuations as the article proceeds, each one more restrictively concrete than the last:

One does not know, of course, if these parallels are exact or even intentional – only Mr. Khan can answer that, and perhaps even he was unaware of the influences that acted upon him. But the possible allusions may be controversial. Some might say the designer is mocking us, or playing with his religious heritage. Yet could he be trying to say something larger about the relationship between Islam and the West? Would these questions, this possible influence, even be raised if he were not a Muslim?<sup>30</sup>

To assess the impact of these words, their incremental impact must be noted. (In many ways it is a slightly exasperating exercise, given the paucity of the journalistic lexicon on display and the tediously escalatory nature of the prose, but its limitations are the point.) ‘One does not know’ is the safe haven for the journalist of admitting to not knowing, therefore having no malicious intent, while at the same time implicitly suggesting something potentially damaging. ‘...only Mr. Khan can answer that...’ holds within it the insinuating suggestion that if Khan fails to respond, he must be hiding something: ‘...perhaps even he was unaware of the influences that acted upon him’ takes the journalist, once again, into the comparatively safe legal ground of apparently hinting at something, while not explicitly stating it. ‘Some might say’ is the classic and much-used recourse for the journalist, sometimes couched in terms of ‘it has been said that’

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<sup>29</sup> Waldman, *The Submission*, p. 115.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

or 'some have claimed that' or 'sources have suggested that'. The accusation has been levelled, without the need to find anyone to do the levelling. Later in the novel, another explicit instance of this technique appears again. Claire is duped into speaking to Alyssa and the resultant news story declares that 'Friends say Claire Burwell is concerned by Mohammad Khan's evasiveness'.<sup>31</sup> The 'friends' are a euphemism for Claire herself, a fact that everyone on the jury realizes instinctively, because in the journalistic lexicon, a 'friend' is merely a euphemism for the person him or herself. On the day the article appears, Claire meets the jury chairman, Paul Rubin, for lunch and concedes immediately that she 'screwed up'. In an ironic nod towards the other means by which information is coaxed from an unwilling source, Paul says acerbically that 'I thought I was going to have to waterboard you to get the truth.'<sup>32</sup>

The article concludes with a return to the interrogative technique; two questions that unite within them some key trigger words: 'Islam', 'West', influence', 'Muslim'. However, this combination of word association and subliminal questioning is mild by comparison with these words' next destination – an appointment with Fox News:

'In a potentially explosive development, the memorial design may actually be a martyrs' paradise,' a Fox News anchor reported soberly, before turning to a panel of experts on radical Islam. One intoned: 'As we all know by now, the terrorists who carried this out believed their act would get them to paradise, with the silks and wine, the pretty young boys and the dark-eyed virgins, and now it seems it has.'

A second affirmed: 'Their remains are in that ground, too. He's made a tomb, a graveyard, for them, not the victims. He would know that the Arabic word for tomb and garden are the same.'

'He's trying to encourage new martyrs – see, here's a taste of where you'll get if you blow yourself up,' a third chimed in.'<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 165-166.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

Here, the word associations are infinitely more dangerous and more damning. The connections that are being made are both crass and unsubtle, but are nevertheless worth examining:

‘explosive development’: a hectoring but easy means to introduce the notion of a bomb attack; the idea that by creating the garden, a terrorist assault is the consequence.

‘paradise, with the silks and wine, the pretty young boys and the dark-eyed virgins’: the familiarly prurient morality card is at play here as silk, wine, pretty young boys and virgins are bound together in a classic journalistic word association device.

‘see, here’s a taste of where you’ll get if you blow yourself up’: a return to the notion of the martyr’s paradise, but this time declared definitively, as the inevitable reward.

Once the information has been further transmuted by Fox News, the new incarnation of flimsy fragments of unsubstantiated rumour and insinuation make their way to the *Post*, the *Wall Street Journal* and to cable news. A compacted paragraph of headlines, scandalized capitalization, speculative comment and ‘well-lathed’ news clips has made the original suggestions by the architecture critic of the *Times* unrecognisable:

‘VICTORY GARDEN!’ screamed the *Post*. A *Wall Street Journal* op-ed called Khan’s design ‘an assault on America’s Judeo-Christian heritage, an attempt to change its cultural landscape. It would appear to be a covert attempt at Islamization,’ the paper intoned. ‘Two decades of multicultural appeasement have led to this: we’ve invited the enemy into our home to decorate.’ The members of Save America from Islam dominated cable news with well-lathed lines – their leader, Debbie Dawson, saying, ‘Muslims believe it is okay to lie to convert people to their truth.’ And ‘Look at the history: Muslims build mosques wherever they’re conquered. They could never get away with putting a mosque at this site, so they’ve come up with something sneakier: an Islamic garden,

this martyrs' paradise, it's like a code to jihadis. And they've smuggled it in our memorial – it's the Trojan horse.'<sup>34</sup>

Yet again, classic tabloid devices are at play here, with the faux-outraged use of capital letters, the conflation of 'assault', 'Judeo-Christian heritage', 'Islamization', 'multicultural appeasement', 'enemy', 'Islamic garden', 'martyrs' paradise', 'jihadis', 'smuggled', 'Trojan horse'. Before the torrent of insinuation reaches its final destination, an appointment with the governor, it stops for one more manipulative encounter with a journalist; this time it is the turn of Lou Sarge, a rightwing shock-jock. In the space of a few seconds he manages to combine 'sneaky', 'planning tunnels', 'something dangerous in that memorial', 'how do we know the danger's just symbolic here?' and 'Is he the Manchurian Candidate of Islam?'

Finally, the jumble of words, associations and devastating insinuation leave the journalists' compound and make their way to their inevitable meeting with Governor Geraldine Bitman. In her hands, the original suggestions by the *Times*' architecture critic have been turned into rich political opportunities:

'It's disturbing that a jury of so-called experts could miss that this is an Islamic garden,' she said.... 'If it turns out to be true, it would be unconstitutional to allow the establishment of any religion on public land,' the governor continued. 'I'm going to seek legal advice. Even if the report isn't true, this may not turn out to be the best design. But I want the public to weigh in on that at the hearing.'<sup>35</sup>

And so, after its brief but labyrinthine path from the *Times* to Governor Bitman, who we learn at the end of the novel is rewarded with the post of US Vice President, the suggestion that Mohammad Khan's garden is Islamic in inspiration, has been transformed into a burning political and constitutional issue. Above all, it has become a matter for a public hearing 'even if the report isn't true'. Veracity or otherwise is no longer even relevant. Its complete detachment from the restraining force of the factual and the verifiable is the final

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 116-117.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

triumph of Alyssa Spier and her journalist colleagues. Spier it is, however, who has the ultimate victory. *The Submission* is insistent upon its drive towards the future, being an embodiment of Waldman's view 'we already have' moved on from the moment of crisis. Spier's triumph is to extract herself from the world of newspapers and to become a 'Web doyenne, who from time to time messaged Mo – "Just checking in! Anything new? Alyssa Spier" – as if they were old friends or collaborators.'<sup>36</sup>

The fact that Alyssa Spier becomes not just an online journalist but a 'doyenne' is her ultimate, albeit curious, reward. She may not have kept her job as a columnist; she has become the First Lady of the Internet instead. Waldman appears to be making the judgement that Alyssa has performed a vital democratic function. This is a perverse kind of logic. Yes, she has challenged the elite power brokers, and yes, she has triumphed. But on the basis of what we have learned about Spier's creed, morality and *métier*, all that has happened is that one group of powerful news controllers has been exchanged for another. There is no evidence in the text that in the phase of moving on from 9/11 anything much has changed when it comes to the balance of power at least.

## Part 2: Textual Toponymy

Names... are the key to everything in this novel

Amy Waldman

On the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, the world watched as relatives of the dead, members of the rescue services, first responders, world leaders and past and present presidents paid their respects at the newly finished National 9/11 Memorial. The centrepiece of the ceremony was the slow, rhythmic reading of nearly 3,000 names. And after the speeches, the readings, the music

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 294.

and the marching, relatives swept slowly but deliberately to find the other, visual incarnation of the names: the names that had been inscribed in bronze around the pools where the Twin Towers had once stood.

The designer of the Memorial, Michael Arad, explained that the idea had been to 'place the names of those who died that day next to each other in a meaningful way, marking the names of family and friends together, as they had lived and died.' This was described as three groupings of 'meaningful adjacencies' that took account of where victims were when the attacks came, who they worked for and their personal relationships.<sup>37</sup> The attempt to bring a formulaic pattern to randomness, to invest order where there had been chaos was, I would suggest, a form of narrative ordering of which fiction itself is, of course, another manifestation.

The striking thing about the sight of thousands of people seeking the one name amongst the many was the urge they had to place their hands on the name once found. Barack and Michelle Obama did precisely the same instinctive thing when it was their turn to stand in front of the names: as though by holding their hands on the written embodiment of the person it was possible to summon something back. A girl laid her face on a name. A man kissed the letters of another. Children and adults up and down the bronze rows placed sheets of paper over the names they had sought and took impressions of the names by scoring soft pencils back and forth over the inscribed letters.<sup>38</sup>

The idea of 'the names' is fundamental to *The Submission*. The novel opens and closes in the same way. It begins with Claire asking 'The names.. What about the names?' and the work closes with her words, 'The names.. Where are they?' The metonymical force of 'the names' is two-fold. By using the term as a synecdoche, Waldman is able to transform those who died into more than just 2,977 individuals, but rather an aggrieved mass chorus acting in concert. The concomitant effect of this is to make their role in the novel less of an absence

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<sup>37</sup> Official 9/11 Memorial website, <<http://www.911memorial.org/names-arrangement>> [accessed 29 March 2013].

<sup>38</sup> All observations I made when watching live television coverage of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary ceremony.

and more of an organic presence. The names denote both 2,977 individuals who once existed, and a mass of 2,977 who still exist as a protesting horde.

The import of names is no accident, as Waldman asserts. And of course, it should be remembered that 9/11 itself, along with September 11 and Ground Zero are, on one level, merely a sequence of numbers; 9s, 11s and zeros. However, the scale of the events they mark in the calendar means that they have perhaps inevitably cast aside their status as mere numbers in exchange for their new role as definers of national catastrophe:

Names, in some ways, are the key to everything in this novel – not just the names of the dead, which is ultimately how they are remembered, but also the names of the living — specifically that of Mohammad Khan, whose name is the real problem. It was a huge shift in memorializing to start listing all of the dead (i.e. ordinary people) and has now become central to any memorial project: the name is the way we sanctify the individual, allow him or her to stand apart from collective death. It's how we say that each life matters. Which is why Claire considers the absence of her husband's name, and Asma the potential absence of her husband's, so wounding — it's an erasure. I sometimes wonder whether with time digital technology will change the nature of memorializing, so that where we now have walls with names you instead will have a panel, and when you press a name that person's life or character will somehow unfold before you. But until then, names are all we have, the simplest record that we lived.<sup>39</sup>

Given Waldman's comment that names are 'the key to everything in this novel', it is important to assess the allegorical force of the names she has chosen. Each holds within it further layers of meaning, a rich, albeit sometimes oblique, aptonym. Alyssa Spier's name is so explicit as to be cratylic. The meaning of Alyssa for example is 'truth', but her surname Spier is an archaic word, denoting 'spy'. Alyssa Spier is both a spy and a spy-er, which in combination places an ironic underscore beneath any notion of truth. There is, in addition, the

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<sup>39</sup> AW interviewed by CLP.



unavoidable association with and memory of A. Spier's homophonic twin, A. Speer (homophonic in conventional English/American pronunciation that is, although not German). Albert Speer, Adolf Hitler's chief architect and Minister of Armaments and War Production, was responsible for the design of the Reich Chancellery as well as the stadium in Nuremberg where political rallies took place. The architectural connections are revealing; Alyssa Spier as a name is a point of authority but in another sense it is just a place-marker for anything that can be routed through that space. In that sense Spier is both the architect and simply the conduit at the same time.

Mohammad's name holds huge political risk for the jury, emblematic as it is of Islam. And yet that perceived risk, as far as the voting panel is concerned, is dissipated by its truncation to Mo. Mo and Mohammad are the same person, but one inspires dread for the jury, the other is entirely benign. Fred, meanwhile, is so definitively a journalist that he even holds his job title of Ed within his name. A further name that may reveal meaning is that of the aggressive, right wing, opinionated talk show host, Sarge; Sarge evokes hints of Sarge Serge in Paul Auster's 9/11 novel *Man in the Dark*, which itself raises thoughts of *Catch 22*'s Major Major, all characters who have unearned and ultimately meaningless authority. I asked Waldman how much meaning she had intended the reader to draw from her names:

I was deliberate with most, including Spier and also Mohammad — not just the truncation, but Mohammad being both the most provocative name to some non-Muslims even as it's the most popular Muslim name. I didn't know about the Auster novel or character — but Sarge (which may or may not be his real name anyway) just seemed to fit the character. With Claire, I kept coming back to claire-obscure — the French translation of chiaroscuro — the way she is, in essence, trying to create herself, using both light and dark to do so.<sup>40</sup>

The deliberate choice of the name 'Claire' to connote the interplaying forces of light and dark has important connections with the work of the architect Maya Lin, who is invoked several times in *The Submission*. The novel's point of crisis

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

is whether to allow Mohammad to proceed with his memorial design, once his identity is known. The more subtle points of crisis concern the original choice itself. As the novel opens, it appears that the *Garden*, Khan's design, will be occluded by the bid known as the *Void*. A link is drawn between the *Void* and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial designed by Maya Lin. Lin's Memorial is a gash in the ground. The *Void* is a laceration in the sky:

A towering black granite rectangle, some twelve stories high, centred in a huge oval pool, it came off in the drawings as a great gash against the sky. The names of the dead were to be carved onto its surface, which would reflect into the water below. It mimicked the Vietnam Veterans Memorial but, to Claire, missed the point. Such abstraction worked when humans could lay their hands on it, draw near enough to alter the scale. But the names on the Void couldn't be reached or even seen properly.<sup>41</sup>

By invoking Maya Lin, Waldman brings into play several layers of meaning. Maya Lin was vilified when her design was chosen; her Asian identity was said to make her an inappropriate choice as the memorial's designer. Indeed, the jury in *The Submission* make instant reference to her when the envelope containing Mohammad's name is torn open. "It's Maya Lin all over again. But worse."<sup>42</sup> Waldman re-imagines the Maya Lin memorial, without its human scale, turning it on its end and pointing it into the sky, where the names cannot be touched or even read. Waldman's point is that a memorial is not invested with meaning simply by its association with the event it signifies:

I think Lin's memorial is brilliant. Partly I was trying to capture how she and that particular memorial have come to shadow, or maybe overshadow, all subsequent memorials - everyone is trying to capture the same mix of minimalism and meaning (and I'm always astounded by how every time I see an image of her memorial [...] I discover a new level of meaning). And it's elusive - no one has matched her.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Waldman, *The Submission*, p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> Waldman, *The Submission*, p. 17.

<sup>43</sup> AW interviewed by CLP.

Maya Lin's essay about the process of designing her memorial is revelatory. Her initial project, while studying architecture at Yale University, had been to design a memorial for an imaginary World War III. Lin's observation that the cataclysmic nature of a third world war would, de facto, obviate the requirement to commemorate it, turned her design into a political rather than a memorializing statement. Her view was that such a war could not be memorialized, because to memorialize means to bear witness; all the witnesses would have gone:

My design for a World War III memorial was a tomblike underground structure that I deliberately made to be a very futile and frustrating experience. I remember the professor of the class coming up to me afterward, saying quite angrily, "If I had a brother who died in that war, I would never want to visit this memorial." I was somewhat puzzled that he didn't quite understand that World War III would be of such devastation that none of us would be around to visit any memorial, and that my design was instead a pre-war commentary. In asking myself what a memorial to a third world war would be, I came up with a political statement that was meant as a deterrent.<sup>44</sup>

Maya Lin's essay was published exactly twenty years after the competition to design the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was announced. She explained that 'I wrote the body of this essay just as the memorial was being completed – in the fall of 1982. Then I put it away ... until now.' The twenty year gap between the launch of the competition and the publication of Lin's formal response to the process mirrors the twenty year gap that Waldman elects to have elapse between the announcement of her fictional competition and Mohammad Khan's decision to talk about the process on camera. It is surely no accident.

In defining her artistic endeavour, Lin spoke of precisely the drive to commemorate 'the names' that Waldman's characters yearn for. 'The names... What about the names?' The sight of the names carved into a memorial wall in

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<sup>44</sup> Maya Lin, 'Making the Memorial', *New York Review of Books*, 2 November 2000, <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2000/nov/02/making-the-memorial/?pagination=false>> [accessed 1 June 2012].

Yale, left 'a lasting impression', as scored into her psyche as any carved names in stone:

The power of a name was very much with me at the time, partly because of the Memorial Rotunda at Yale. In Woolsey Hall, the walls are inscribed with the names of all the Yale alumni who have been killed in wars. I had never been able to resist touching the names cut into these marble walls, and no matter how busy or crowded the place is, a sense of quiet, a reverence, always surrounds those names. Throughout my freshman and sophomore years, the stonecutters were carving in by hand the names of those killed in the Vietnam War, and I think it left a lasting impression on me... the sense of the power of a name.<sup>45</sup>

How could she ever forget 'the power of a name'? The power of Maya Lin's own name, like the fictional Mohammad Khan, might have been sufficient to deny her the prize. But she was entered as the veiled Number 1026, while Khan went under the protective cloak of Number 4879. From the beginning Lin wondered 'if it had not been an anonymous entry 1026 but rather an entry by Maya Lin, would I have been selected?'<sup>46</sup>

The totemic power of names is what made her memorial so powerful, but not all names are created equal. Police cadet and first responder Mohammad Salman Hamdani, who died in the attacks, was not included in the list of first responders killed. 'Nor can his name be found among those of victims whose bodies were found in the wreckage of the north tower, where his body was finally discovered in 34 parts.'<sup>47</sup> Instead, he is listed on the Memorial's last panel, 'with the names of others who did not fit into the rubrics the memorial created to give placements meaning.'<sup>48</sup> His mother Talat Hamdani explained bitterly that they

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Sharon Otterman, 'Obscuring a Muslim Name, and an American's Sacrifice', *New York Times*, 1 January 2012, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/02/nyregion/sept-11-memorial-obscures-a-police-cadets-bravery.html?pagewanted=all>> [accessed 4 June 2012].

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

'do not want anyone with a Muslim name to be acknowledged at ground zero with such high honors.'<sup>49</sup>

To underscore the power of a name, there was a political crisis at the museum being created to memorialize 9/11 when it was revealed that reference would be made to the terrorists themselves, including their photographs. The chief executive of the Memorial and Museum Foundation, Joseph Daniels, expressed his surprise. 'You don't create a museum about the Holocaust and not say that it was the Nazis who did it'<sup>50</sup>, he said. But New York City's fire chief, along with others, protested that such an inclusion would be to 'honor' the terrorists.<sup>51</sup>

It is as if the 'impression' that the names acting in concert made upon Lin, was as etched into her consciousness as a stonemason's chisel is upon stone. The instinct that the relatives of both the Vietnam dead as well as the 9/11 dead had to place their hands upon their names etched into memorial stone was invoked by President Barack Obama, at the annual Memorial Day observance held at Maya Lin's wall. To mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the Vietnam War, it was to the names that he referred: 'Fifty years later, we come to this wall – to this sacred place – to remember. We can step towards its granite wall and reach out, touch a name...'<sup>52</sup> For Maya Lin, the instinct to memorialize by naming the names became a narratively-driven art:

The memorial is analogous to a book in many ways. Note that on the right-hand panels the pages are set ragged right and on the left they are set ragged left, creating a spine at the apex as in a book. Another issue was scale; the text type is the smallest that we had come across, less than half an inch, which is unheard of in monument type sizing. What it

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Patricia Cohen, 'At Museum on 9/11, Talking Through an Identity Crisis', *New York Times*, 2 June, 2012, <[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/03/arts/design/sept-11-memorial-museums-fraught-task-to-tell-the-truth.html?\\_r=1&nl=nyregion&emc=edit\\_ur\\_20120603](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/03/arts/design/sept-11-memorial-museums-fraught-task-to-tell-the-truth.html?_r=1&nl=nyregion&emc=edit_ur_20120603)> [accessed 29 March 2013].

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> President Barack Obama, speaking on Memorial Day, at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C. 28 May 2012.

does is create a very intimate reading in a very public space, the difference in intimacy between reading a billboard and reading a book.<sup>53</sup>

The memorial as book; the book as memorial. It is legitimate to argue that *The Submission* is, itself, a form of memorial or at least a testament to a past experience. Indeed it is, I would suggest, a work that endeavours to act as a memorializing meditation on the attacks, in a way that other works published in the decade since 11 September 2001 do not. It is in its resolution to look forward and not stay in the present that its memorializing power lies, since one of the prerequisites of a memorial is that it should occupy a retrospective time frame to the event itself. I would argue that works such as *Falling Man*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and even the more oblique *The Lay of the Land*, are immersed in the trauma of the event, rather than a memorialization of it. The guiding principle of Molly, the student who interviews Mo to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the failed bid to build the *Garden*, is that 'the process of creating a memorial was itself part of the memorial'<sup>54</sup>; so too is *The Submission* part of the memorialization. It is a work that assesses the trauma of the event and then distances itself from it in order to memorialize it. But asked if we demand too much of our formal memorials, Waldman's response was revealing. She seems to suggest that the 'real 9/11 memorial' as she puts it, failed in its retrospective capacity to put enough distance between the then and the now:

I believe we've become afflicted, a little, by a memorial-industrial complex, in which we pour enormous amounts of money and efforts into memorial while often ignoring the questions that hover around their edges. [...] I think the real 9/11 memorial, which I saw only a few months ago, is very powerful in its design, and yet it also seems, in scale, somehow disproportionate – suggesting, somehow, that we can't move on from that moment, when in fact of course we already have. It's hard to separate, now, what happened on September 11 with everything that happened as a result in the decade after – in my mind, at least, they've woven together as a single piece of history. But the memorial treats that day in isolation; it has to. I'm interested in the ads all over New York

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<sup>53</sup> Lin, 'Making the Memorial'.

<sup>54</sup> Waldman, *The Submission*, p. 286.

connected to the memorial — they urge people to ‘Honour, Remember, Reunite.’ Honour and remember, yes, but reunite around what, exactly?<sup>55</sup>

The present tense imperative to ‘Honour, Remember, Reunite’ is, in Waldman’s terms, one of its temporal flaws. There is the additional flaw that to ‘Honour, Remember, Reunite’ does not seem to apply if the designer of the fictional memorial is a Muslim or, as in Lin’s case, the designer of a real memorial is Asian. The imagined travails endured by Mohammad Khan were also faced by Lin, once it was announced that a 21-year-old Asian student had won the Vietnam memorial competition. She, like her fictional counterpart, does not believe she would have won had her identity been known:

I remember reading the article that appeared in *The Washington Post* referring to “An Asian Memorial for an Asian War” and I knew we were in trouble. The controversy exploded in Washington after that article. Ironically, one side attacked the design for being “too Asian,” while others saw its simplicity and understatement, not as an intention to create a more Eastern, meditative space, but as a minimalist statement which they interpreted as being nonreferential and disconnected from experience.<sup>56</sup>

There was the additional difficulty for Lin that the stone she had chosen for her memorial was black, forcing her to fight against what she called a ‘cultural prejudice against the color black’. Ultimately a four-star general, ‘who happened to be black’, had to testify before a committee hearing to defend the colour, before the design could proceed. Lin then found that she would not be allowed to source the black granite from either Canada or Sweden, despite the beauty of the stone from both those countries, because draft evaders had fled to both countries and the veterans would not tolerate the association. The choice of black for her memorial is revealing about the cerebral nature of Lin’s quest to memorialize, and as I will explain, it is also revealing about Waldman’s character Claire. First, Lin was very specific about her choice of black:

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<sup>55</sup> AW interviewed by CLP.

<sup>56</sup> Lin, ‘Making the Memorial’.

I always saw the wall as pure surface, an interface between light and dark, where I cut the earth and polished its open edge. The wall dematerializes as a form and allows the names to become the object, a pure and reflective surface that would allow visitors the chance to see themselves with the names. I do not think I thought of the color black as a color, more as the idea of a dark mirror into a shadowed mirrored image of the space, a space we cannot enter and from which the names separate us, an interface between the world of the living and the world of the dead.<sup>57</sup>

Lin's vision of a wall that is an 'interface between light and dark' and 'an interface between the world of the living and the world of the dead', or as David Simpson defined it, a wall with 'a semireflective surface that confronts the beholder with his or her own historical presence and thence with the attendant complexities of self identification (survival and complicity among them)',<sup>58</sup> is, I would argue, precisely the motif that Waldman invokes in her deliberate selection of Claire's name. Both as a character and as a name, Claire is, as Waldman confirmed, the embodiment of light and dark, the interface between the world of the living and the dead, a space we cannot enter. By adopting this reading of the text, Claire is both an anamnesis of Lin's memorial and the embodiment of its interfacial liminality, as well as representing a metaphorical memorial herself. Of the four drawings provided by Khan as part of his bid, it is no accident that 'Claire's favourite was the chiaroscuro of winter.'<sup>59</sup> Claire is consistently presented by Waldman as a character who stands apart, separated from everyone else both by her demeanour and by her inescapable position as the widow for whom life has stopped. She describes herself as being dislocated, as having 'one leg in New York and one in America'<sup>60</sup> and, with even more resonance we learn that she was swimming underwater as the planes struck. 'She would think often about having been submerged in water while her

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 76.

<sup>59</sup> Waldman, *The Submission*, p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 200.



husband was consumed by fire. What did this say? It was like a myth, a dark poem whose meaning just eluded her.<sup>61</sup>

There is a sense that the committee process of choosing a 9/11 memorial is the means by which Claire attempts to reintegrate herself, to escape the 'dark poem'. Mohammad Khan's garden is ordered, peaceful, calm, organic, structured. Its classic *chahar bagh* quadrants, planted with columns of steel trees made from metal salvaged from the destroyed buildings, are divided by pathways and by two perpendicular canals.<sup>62</sup> On its twenty-seven foot high perimeter walls, the names of the dead are scored. The jury member insistent that the *Void* should win because it is "visceral, angry, dark, raw, because there was no joy on that day"<sup>63</sup>, dismisses Khan's design because "Gardens are fetishes of the European bourgeoisie."<sup>64</sup> I asked Waldman how conscious she was of the role of the garden as a bringer of order from chaos, a role it has played in literature for centuries. Is such order merely an aspiration, or can a work of art have a salving power, whether it is a garden, a novel, a sculpture or a piece of music? She answered:

I was very interested in the way gardens came to represent both philosophical and practical order. I think there are parallels to the novel, which can salve by ordering reality — except that the novel should also, on some level, introduce chaos to order. It should make you question the reality before you, should unsettle you on some level.<sup>65</sup>

Waldman's novel of course does not only question the reality before us, it mirrors it too. As Waldman was completing her novel in which a disputed memorial is finally denied its place in New York, a bitterly contested row broke out about the creation of an Islamic cultural centre to be built near Ground Zero. As Richard Crownshaw defines it, the fierce arguments 'resonated with the idea that Ground Zero is hallowed or sacred ground and the proximity of a mosque is

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>62</sup> *Chahar bagh* is a four-part Islamic garden, divided by paths and intersecting channels of water.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>65</sup> AW interviewed by CLP.

sacrilegious.<sup>66</sup> Waldman was more journalistic in her analysis; she was onto a story:

I took it both as confirmation of my instincts in conceiving the novel in the first place, but also a more acute sense of how the mechanics of something like this would actually play out — the spectre of violence, for example; the unexpected chain reactions.<sup>67</sup>

The ‘unexpected chain reactions’, the ‘spectre of violence’ were certainly familiar to Maya Lin. When she was fighting politicians, journalists and war veterans over the design, the lettering, the stone and the concept, one of the most bitter battles was fought over two statues that her detractors wanted to impose upon her vision. It was suggested that the monumental statue of infantrymen and a second statue to represent women who died in Vietnam should be placed at the apex of Lin’s wall. The apex of the Memorial is its most important part, the spine of its book. The prosaic statues would have dwarfed her structure, converting her walls ‘to a backdrop and violating that private contemplative space’. Maya Lin fought that battle as hard as she had had to fight the others and finally the statues were placed to one side. ‘Ironically’, she said, ‘the compromise memorializes the conflict in the building of the piece.’<sup>68</sup>

Of course Khan’s garden is finally built too, just as Lin’s memorial was, but not where originally intended. Khan is commissioned to recreate it in Mumbai, by ‘some rich Muslim’. Khan invites Molly and her cameraman William, who is Claire Burwell’s son, into the new incarnation of the *Garden*. William films the landscaping, unable to reveal to Khan his true identity, and takes the images home for his terminally ill mother to watch. The garden appears to be a transplanted replica, with its cherry trees, almond, pear, apricot and walnut trees; its rows of cypresses and steel trees, ‘glinting and upside down, with roots like a distraught woman’s tangled hair in place of branches and leaves.’

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<sup>66</sup> Richard Crownshaw, ‘Deterritorializing the ‘Homeland’ in American Studies and American Fiction after 9/11’, *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 45 issue 4 (November 2011), pp. 757-776, p. 757.

<sup>67</sup> AW interviewed by CLP.

<sup>68</sup> Lin, ‘Making the Memorial’.

The pavilion is there, and its canals, 'contemplative spaces' and marble columns:

Claire closed her eyes and heard the water rippling. Khan's footsteps crunching, birds singing, chattering, telling their stories, maybe hers. Cal felt closer than he had in twenty years. Seeing the Garden alive was a gift and rebuke.<sup>69</sup>

But when the camera pulls out and pans along the inside walls of the *Garden*, Claire sees that where the names should be, there are extracts from the Quran in flowing calligraphy. Claire's instinct is that it is a taunt, a betrayal. And yet, as an endorsement of Molly's idea that 'the process of creating a memorial was itself part of the memorial'<sup>70</sup>, Khan leaves a parting statement on film. 'Use your imagination.' Her imagination fails her and she is unable to see anything but insult and mockery, but William urges her to look at the final frames of film. In close-up, she sees 'a few small rocks stacked in a corner of the garden.' In the *Garden* William has built his own memorial to his father, a tiny replica of the memorial cairns of pebbles that he had built as a child believing that they would help his dead father find his way home. 'In Khan's garden, her son had laid his hand. With a pile of stones, he had written a name.' It is not made clear if Claire is convinced by this gesture. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that she is not. Unlike William, Claire is still struggling to escape the phase of memorialization, possibly unique to 9/11, described by David Simpson as 'propagandist compression':

The balance between acting out and working through has been skewed by a prolonged period of ideological shoring up and military hitting out. Mourning and melancholia have both been made secondary to the initiation of new states of emergency. For a national culture as committed as is that of the United States to a high level of ethical self-justification and even self-righteousness, this compression produces a definite tension in the convention of national self-presentation.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Waldman, *The Submission*, p. 297.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 286.

<sup>71</sup> Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*, p. 4.

The conflation of memorialization with 'hitting out' marks a phase in the process of responding to 9/11 as well as a phase within *The Submission*. Some characters are pushed by Waldman beyond that period of 'propagandist compression', while others, Claire amongst them, are not. The memorialization of the conflict itself is, in a sense, what William's cairn of pebbles represents. The cairn is both a burial mound for Calder Burwell and an embodiment of him. It is his name and his identity writ large. But so too is it a means of memorializing 'the conflict in the building of the piece,' just as the statues of the women and the infantrymen are at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Above all, the cairn of pebbles is an attempt by Waldman to crystallize her sense of what a memorial attempts to do. As she said, 'it's not just memorializing the dead – it's also memorializing what was changed in America by the way they died. I think the two go hand in hand – grieving for people, grieving for other things that were lost or sacrificed as a result of their death – and the novel is an attempt, perhaps, to conjoin them in a way an actual memorial can't.'<sup>72</sup> Waldman is not explicit about the things that 'were lost or sacrificed' but it would be fair to assume that liberal values, inclusivity and tolerance could be listed amongst them.

In the concluding section of this chapter, I will assess the degree to which Waldman's novel not only attempts to conjoin the death of so many with the death of so much, but also whether it is able to push the narrative forward, out of retrospective memorialization and out of the confines of the American homeland.

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<sup>72</sup> AW interviewed by CLP.

### Part 3: Text as Memorial

The country had moved on, self-corrected, as it always did, that feverish time mostly forgotten. Only Mo was stuck in the past.

Amy Waldman, *The Submission*

The drive to create the memorial garden in *The Submission* is demonstrated to be as explicitly political as it is emotional. The chairman of the jury is firm in his view that the longer the space remains empty, the more it 'became a symbol of defeat, of surrender, something for "them", whoever they were, to mock. A memorial only to America's diminished greatness, its new vulnerability to attack.'<sup>73</sup> But he also concedes that there are those who think it is too soon to create a memorial because 'the country hasn't yet won or lost the war.'<sup>74</sup>

These fictional triumphalist political impulses resonate so powerfully because they replicate historical reality. The mission to memorialize the tragedy of 9/11 led to an almost fetishistic quest for numerological significance, a numbers cult that was inevitably an intellectual *cul de sac* but which appeared to offer a kind of bolstering solace nevertheless: the collection of tales called *110 Stories* in mimesis of the WTC's 110 storeys; the decision to make the newly constructed 1WTC 1776 feet high as a numerical embodiment of the 1776 US Declaration of Independence; the announcement that, with the hasty addition of a new steel column, the still unfinished building had become the tallest building in NYC one day before the first anniversary of the operation to kill Osama Bin Laden.<sup>75</sup> Ensuring that the building was 'tall enough' with one day left to go, left room in the news schedules for the President to fly to Afghanistan to address US troops, although since his address was at 4am local time, but prime time in the

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<sup>73</sup> Waldman, *The Submission*, p. 8.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>75</sup> 'One World Trade Center becomes New York's tallest building', BBC News, 1 May 2012, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-17898138>> [accessed 4 March 2013].

US, it was perfectly clear who his real intended audience was.<sup>76</sup> It was announced that the rooftop parapet of the building will be placed at precisely 1368 feet, the same height as the original One World Trade Center.

In even more neurotic mode, connections were made on the day of the attacks, linking the date, the ninth month and the eleventh day with the US emergency telephone code of 911;<sup>77</sup> on the internet, complex games were played with typefaces to try to bring meaning where there seemed to be none:

typing NYC into a Microsoft Word Document, highlighting it, and then changing the font to Wingdings creates: ☠☆☞. At the same time, the widely circulated claims that Q33NY – which becomes ➔☞☞☠☆ by the same process – was the flight number of one of the crashed planes was false.<sup>78</sup>

Inevitably, such simplistic endeavours to explain, resulted in disappointment, either because the facile solution provided by the font of Wingdings was so ludicrously bereft of meaning, or because the title *110 Stories* simply sounded cheap; or because the endless wrangling over the design for the new 1WTC resulted in a very different building than the one originally envisaged, one that could only retain its symbolic height of 1776 feet by having the distance made up with the addition of a 408 foot spire and antenna. (The spire was finally lifted into position on 19 May 2013.<sup>79</sup>) In fact the building's symbolic height was the only element that finally remained of architect Daniel Libeskind's competition-winning design, an outcome that stands in wry counterpoint to Mohammad Khan's fictional experience.

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<sup>76</sup> 'Barack Obama pledges to "finish the job" in Afghanistan', BBC News, 2 May 2012, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-17917750>> [accessed 4 March 2013].

<sup>77</sup> Marc Redfield, *The Rhetoric of Terror: Reflections on 9/11 and the War on Terror* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), pp. 16-17.

<sup>78</sup> Stuart Allan, 'Reweaving the Internet: online news of September 11', in *Journalism after September 11*, ed. by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 119-140, p.133.

<sup>79</sup> 'One World Trade Center spire installed in New York City', BBC News, 10 May 2013, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-22483761>> [accessed 15 May 2013].

Literary extrapolations from this kind of numerological fetishism produced the brand of novel that aims for the ‘bland polarity of “us-versus-them”’,<sup>80</sup> the binary blind-alley of a work of fiction that sets up the villain and delivers a triumphalist knock-out blow in retribution. The more successful and inventive fiction since 9/11 has evolved in stages. Having abandoned the ‘bland polarity’ blind-alley, the first stage in a new and embryonic literary exploration to find a discourse adequate to 9/11’s uniquely demanding needs, was to create novels that could give voice to what Kristiaan Versluys called ‘stuttering and stammering’:

They affirm the humanity of the befuddled individual groping for an explanation, express the bewilderment of the citizen as opposed to the cocksureness of the killers, give voice to stuttering and stammering as a precarious act of defiance. In gingerly working their way around the unsayability of the events, they are able to substantiate a true ‘poethic turn’: that is to say, their poetics is a form of ethics. Through formal means they suggest the impact of shock – the immediate shock that causes panic or the slower realization that things have been altered beyond repair. These works testify to the shattering of certainties and the laborious recovery of balance.<sup>81</sup>

The novels that have taken a ‘poethic turn’, formally establishing their shock and attempting, via linguistic ‘stuttering and stammering’ to ‘testify to the shattering of certainties’ include *The Lay of the Land*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, *Man in the Dark* and *Falling Man*, all of them analyzed in previous chapters. Each expresses, via structural and semiological means, a destabilised and destabilising view of the world.

In the case of Foer’s work, the language, the linguistic play, the typographical experimentation, the whimsical thought patterns, all express a sense of dislocation. As discussed in Chapter 2, the final pages imagine that the attacks of 9/11 did not occur and a photographic reversal of the trajectory of the falling victims is enacted. The narrative drive is explicit; to attempt to send the trauma-inducing present back from where it had come, while accentuating the

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<sup>80</sup> Versluys, *Out of the Blue*, p. 17.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

‘shattering of certainties’ by conceding that such a reversal is not possible. This is not revanchism but neurotic regression. The experimental alternate time frame of *Man in the Dark* is another means by which a novelist has attempted to express the ‘shattering of certainties’. Once again, the destabilising and disorientating narrative drive in this case is to envision a world in which 9/11 did not occur; in other words another form of reversal, in this case a semiological one. *Falling Man*, again assessed in a previous chapter, attempts to freeze time, as represented by the figure who mimics the iconic falling man who appeared to dive heroically from the twin towers. DeLillo’s falling man does not dangle speculatively from a bungee rope in imitation of those who fell, but he stops dead and holds his grotesquely mimetic position stock-still. He is the embodiment of narrated time that has juddered to a frozen halt. These are not formal ‘time novels’, but nevertheless they are governed, even captivated, by a longing to turn things back to a previous time. Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* arguably represents a later stage in the drive to stutter and stammer and to send things backwards. In Hamid’s work, a different narrative method is explored, in which an insistently persuasive narrator speaks in the present tense to an unknown, silent listener who is cast in the second person. The effect of this inventive narrative construct is to fix the text in a more formal and more insistent present. The faux present tense that is sometimes attached to a third person protagonist often snags on the credulousness of the reader, becoming wearisome in its fakery; the writing of something that is ostensibly happening at the moment hand touches paper is notoriously hard to sustain. But by transferring the listener to the second person, making that character both ‘the unknown’ as well as the reader, is to cement the text more decisively and credibly in the moment. To be lodged in that dread-filled present is to refuse to move on. Indeed, the novel itself explicitly does not move on, even as it concludes. *The Lay of the Land*’s modus operandi, as discussed in Chapter 1, was to register shock by taking only a glancing view at 9/11 and retreating to the relative safety of, to borrow J.R.R. Tolkien’s term, contemporaneous ‘applicability.’ Arguably, all five novels represent forms of postmodern mythopoeia, in which the instinct is to envision alternative, compelling realities. *The Submission*, however, has an entirely different narrative force. Instead of taking the ‘poethic turn’ it takes what I would term the ‘pragmatic path’. It



pushes the reader and its characters insistently forwards, applying a pejorative judgement to those who refuse to accept its momentum.

The publication of *The Submission* only a few days before the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks was inevitably deliberate. To the extent that it was a political choice to publish precisely then, it could be argued that the decision falls within the boundary of numerological fetishism. However, *The Submission* attempts to say what people had not dared think yet; that, possibly, after ten years, far from being unable to move on, according to Waldman, 'of course we already have.' So, for example, Khan, who refuses to attend the retrospective of his career at the Museum of New Architecture in New York, is tacitly chastised in the text for looking backwards:

The country had moved on, self-corrected, as it always did, that feverish time mostly forgotten. Only Mo was stuck in the past. He wanted acknowledgement of the wrong done to him, awaited credit for his refusal to agree that the attack justified America's suspicion of its Muslims any more than it justified the state's overreaching. Today most Americans thought as he had but at the time his stand had been lonely. Hard.<sup>82</sup>

That proleptic self-correction is a sign that the 'poethic turn' is no longer so compelling. Waldman's novel has corrected itself too and taken the pragmatic path; the subliminal message is that, so too, should Mo. Later, when he is interviewed by Molly and filmed by Claire's son for their documentary, he is admonished once again:

his gloss – that he had been pulled abroad by opportunity – was a false one. He had been pushed. America had offered his immigrant parents the freedom to reinvent themselves. Mo had found himself reinvented by others, so distorted he couldn't recognize himself. His imagination was made suspect. And so he had traced his parents' journey in reverse: back to India...<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Waldman, *The Submission*, p. 287.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

This, however, is problematic. Far from embracing Rothberg's idea that the 9/11 novelist should seek a 'centrifugal literature of extraterritoriality' in which they provide 'cognitive maps that imagine how US citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, both for Americans and for others',<sup>84</sup> *The Submission* envisages a territory in which Mo and the liminal figure of Abdul, the son of the murdered 9/11 widow Asma, no longer have a place. The centrifuge has spun them out. Indeed, Abdul's adult persona could just as easily have inhabited the pages of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Abdul, who has never returned to the United States, speaks mournfully on camera of his sense of divided self:

Abdul had applied to and been accepted at colleges in the United States, but under pressure from his relatives decided to stay in Bangladesh. America tempted him and scared him. Both of his parents had died there. This was reason to go, reason not to. Mo remembered how his own decision not to go home had curled him in bed. How many nights had Abdul spent in the same position? 'I sometimes feel each place is the wrong place,' the young man on the screen said softly.<sup>85</sup>

Mohsin Hamid's character speaks of that torn identity too, when a divided character moves from one territory to another, in his case from America to Pakistan:

I recall the Americanness of my own gaze when I returned to Lahore that winter when war was in the offing. I was struck at first by how shabby our house appeared, with cracks running through its ceilings and dry bubbles of paint flaking off where dampness had entered its walls. ... But as I reacclimatized and my surroundings once again became familiar, it occurred to me that the house had not changed in my absence. I had changed; I was looking about me with the eyes of a foreigner, and not just any foreigner, but that particular type of entitled and unsympathetic

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<sup>84</sup> Michael Rothberg, 'A Failure of the Imagination: Diagnosing the Post-9/11 Novel: A Response to Richard Gray', *American Literary History*, vol. 21, no. 1 (Spring 2009), pp. 152-158, p. 158.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291.

American who so annoyed me when I encountered him in the classrooms and workplaces of your country's elite. This realization angered me; staring at my reflection in the speckled glass of my bathroom mirror I resolved to exorcize the unwelcome sensibility by which I had become possessed.<sup>86</sup>

Hamid defines his own identity as divided, just as Waldman's Abdul does. I asked Waldman if she had envisaged such overlaps between Abdul, Mo and Mohsin Hamid. Interestingly she distanced her character from Hamid's protagonist, because Mo 'is an American':

for me the essence of Mo – his character and his plight – is that he is an American, which Hamid's character was not. It is his own country – his own identity – he has become estranged from. Hamid's character begins as a foreigner in America; Mo, on some level, is made one.<sup>87</sup>

So the distinction in Waldman's mind is between being and becoming an American, a distinction that may prove provocative to Mohsin Hamid, the 'divided man' so exasperated at never being asked if he is the American listener in his novel. Perhaps it may provoke a certain bewilderment in him too, given the fact that Kamila Shamsie defined Hamid as 'more American than me' in her interview. But there is another, more important, distinction. There is a driving force in *The Submission* that says the backward step is the regressive step; the divided self is the unevolved, unresolved self. To look backwards is to be out of step. At the start of the novel, when Khan first sees the destroyed twin towers on the day of the attacks his thoughts are of absence, of something missing, or something having been lost:

He had been indifferent to the buildings when they stood, preferring more fluid forms to their stark brutality, their self-conscious monumentalism. But he had never felt violent toward them, as he sometimes had toward that awful Verizon building on Pearl Street. Now he wanted to fix their

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<sup>86</sup> Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2007), p. 124.

<sup>87</sup> AW interviewed by CLP.

image, their worth, their place. They were living rebukes to nostalgia, these Goliaths that had crushed small businesses, vibrant streetscapes, generational continuities, and other romantic notions beneath their giant feet. Yet it was nostalgia he felt for them. A skyline was a collaboration, if an inadvertent one, between generations, seeming no less natural than a mountain range that had shuddered up from the earth. This new gap in space reversed time.<sup>88</sup>

However, the collaboration, it would seem, is a temporal one, across generations, rather than a territorial one, across national borders. In some respects, then, this is the old, revanchist way of thinking. Although the novel appears to have cast itself free from the gravitational pull of 9/11, there is not a sense that it is ready to fling itself outside national borders. Yet Kamila Shamsie, so resolute in her view that American exceptionalism should not be reinforced in fictional responses to 9/11, reviewed *The Submission* for *The Guardian* extremely favourably. Her response to Waldman's conclusion is revealing, in part because of the 'disturbing' decision Shamsie made to leave her character Raza incarcerated in Guantanamo at the end of her own novel. Shamsie's review of *The Submission*, in addition to drawing attention to the novel's title's connection with the word 'Muslim' meaning 'one who submits', said the following:

The final section of the novel takes place 20 years after the main events, and more than a decade into our future. Waldman's imagined America of the future has "self-corrected" away from its mood of paranoia, the suspicion between its Muslim and non-Muslim citizens a thing of the past. From another writer this might sound like unwarranted optimism, but Waldman has been so sure-footed until now that it would be churlish not to hope that she is right about this, too.<sup>89</sup>

Is there a trace of longing here, from an author whose own pessimistic conclusion to her novel turned out to be so prescient? When President Obama

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<sup>88</sup> Waldman, *The Submission*, p. 29.

<sup>89</sup> Kamila Shamsie, 'The Submission by Amy Waldman – a review', *Guardian*, 24 August 2011, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/aug/24/the-submission-amy-waldman-review>> [accessed 20 May 2013].

took office in January 2009 Guantanamo held 245 terror suspects. In April 2013, Barack Obama said once again that there should be a push to close the prison and yet the number of inmates at that time still stood at 166.<sup>90</sup> Despite Shamsie's father's suggestion that Obama's announcement 'changes the end of your novel, doesn't it', Shamsie's scepticism turned out to be correct. Indeed it is hard to envisage a time when the colour orange will cease to be Guantanamo's synecdoche. (Shamsie's novel never uses the word 'Guantanamo' at all, merely its synaesthetic call sign.)

While Waldman's thesis is applauded with tentative optimism by Shamsie, Waldman herself appears less sure. In December 2011 she published 'Trotter's Road', a 'seasonal short story written for the *Financial Times*'. It is a work that imagines and indeed inhabits the extraterritorial far more fully than *The Submission* does. In this story an Afghani man, desperate to raise enough money to be allowed to marry a local man's daughter, is employed by the American military to act as translator. The US forces have appointed him to translate Pashto, without seeming to understand or even care that Dari is in fact his first language. He fills the gaps in his knowledge of the language with his own inventions, telling each side what they want to hear. Colonel Trotter yearns to hear that the warlord who controls the section of land on which he is determined to build a road, will halt all attacks. The warlord desires money to raise a militia. Aziz tells each side they will get what they desire. His deceit has been an incremental one, each lie easier to tell than the last:

Aziz would not pay in blood for his lie, but someone would, and he almost wished he wouldn't be around to see it. But he had no choice, with his own deadline ahead. His father-in-law now wanted the bride price by the Afghan new year, less than four months away. Habiba, happiness: he had to try.

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<sup>90</sup> 'Barack Obama says Guantanamo Bay prison must close', 30 April 2013, BBC News, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-22358351>> [accessed 15 May 2013].

War had long ago foreshortened his horizons. To take the road kilometre by kilometre – to solve this problem today, even if it created new problems tomorrow – was all he knew how to do.<sup>91</sup>

The lacuna between what is said and what is meant, what is uttered and what is heard, what is beneficial to one and detrimental to another, what is seen to be there and what is actually there; these are perhaps the more legitimate conclusions to be drawn from Waldman's fictional thesis. Indeed, it is on this very note that *The Submission* concludes. 'Use your imagination', urges Mohammad Khan, 'Use your imagination'. Khan's memorial, eventually commissioned as a pleasure garden, is bereft of 'the names', the gap between its original purpose and its ultimate role. But with imagination, and with a pile of stones, Claire Burwell's son had written his father's name. It is, admittedly, over-sentimentalized and it is not the broad, sweeping finale that Kamila Shamsie is so hesitantly hoping for, but it is, at last, a conclusion.

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<sup>91</sup> Amy Waldman, 'Trotter's Road', *Financial Times*, 30 December 2011, <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/407737e0-27f3-11e1-a4c4-00144feabdc0.html#axzzIwq3gUt4V>> [accessed 29 March 2013].

## CODA

*The Submission's* prolepsis, whilst a familiar literary convention, articulates a fundamental aspect of fiction's hesitant response to 9/11: the novelist's exploration of temporal anxieties. How could the writer look to the future, without addressing the present? And how could the present be redefined artistically when it was so unbearable to examine? Writers have been writhing and struggling to avoid 9/11, as much as they have been striving to address it. Ford was perhaps the most circumspect of them all in his response to 9/11, almost as though he was taking a wide arc around someone asking for money in the street, with his eyes half averted. However, Auster, DeLillo, Foer and Hamid all struggled too; they may have addressed the catastrophe more directly than Ford did, but they were no less challenged, even repelled by it. Shamsie and Aslam were less fastidious and anxious in their responses, but they too wrestled with the idea of 'what next?' Waldman, writing ten years after 9/11, was in some ways liberated from the event itself. What could be more substantially 'next' than a proleptic approach, with the submission of the title becoming not just a concrete but an abstract noun? Waldman's submission to and accommodation with the catastrophe was attainable in part because she benefited from the very thing that Foer, Auster et al were most tested by: time. She struggled, however, to escape the confines of the homeland shunned so deliberately by Shamsie and Aslam.

My findings would suggest that future novelists may enjoy greater freedoms to define 9/11 than the early experimenters. The conundrum for the literary first responders was not just their own panic but the automaticity of audiences' revulsion. As I have tried to demonstrate, there was a sense that things could not be said and, in the visual arts, things could not be shown. The self-censorship admitted to by TV anchor Dan Rather permeated the work of artists who seemed anxious and overwrought about what they could write. Certainly, further insights into the processes of defining such a globally 'known' event are likely in the work of future novelists. There is no sense at present that

journalism will be able to provide any more assistance than it has done hitherto; indeed it seems likely that the work of journalists – ‘embedded’ as it is in the immediacy of the moment - will continue to be a false friend to novelists, both when they attempt to engage in journalism themselves and when they seek its guidance in constructing novelistic responses to global crises and conundrums.

As I have suggested throughout this work, 9/11 challenged all artists seeking to define it. In being an unimagined, unimaginable catastrophe that was new in its scope and unique in its contemporaneous dissemination to a global audience, it produced a new landscape for artists; they found that they had no predecessors. It is legitimate to suggest that novelists could therefore have been liberated from some of Harold Bloom’s ‘anxiety of influence’. However, it seemed as though 9/11 novelists invented a whole new set of anxieties for themselves, based not on their forebears but on their own sense of being somehow inadequate to the event. It was a sense captured by Art Spiegelman, the artist whose home was in Canal Street a few blocks from the World Trade Center and whose daughter’s school at Ground Zero was turned into a triage centre on the day of the attacks. He noted in his work *In the Shadow of No Towers*, that the most abiding vision of 9/11 for him was one that he could not draw:

The pivotal image from my 9/11 morning – one that didn’t get photographed or videotaped into public memory but still remains burned onto the inside of my eyelids several years later – was the image of the looming north tower’s glowing bones just before it vaporized. I repeatedly tried to paint this with humiliating results...<sup>1</sup>

The poet and former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams articulated a similar difficulty; that any attempt to render the attacks, in words rather than pictures in his case, would inevitably be impermanent. His view that any response to 9/11 could only be mutable and faltering was why he chose the title *Writing in the Dust* for his reflections:

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<sup>1</sup> Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), np.



writing in the dust is writing something that won't last, something exposed to dissolution. [...] This isn't a theology or a programme for action, but one person's attempt to find words for the grief and shock and loss of one moment. In the nature of things, these words won't last, and I need to acknowledge and accept that, and hope only that they may help to take forward someone else's mourning.'<sup>2</sup>

It was Richard Ford's familiar conundrum: where were the words? And, as Williams warns, even if the words can be found, are writers entitled to use them?

It can sound as though you're gratefully borrowing someone else's terrible experience to make another pious point. And after all, not everyone dies with words of love. There will have been cursing and hysteria and frantic, deluded efforts to be safe at all costs when people knew what was going on in those planes. And would anyone want their private words of love butchered to make a sermon?<sup>3</sup>

My introduction laid out some of the conundrums and pitfalls for the novelist attempting to somehow 'contain' 9/11. Rowan Williams' view is that it is the 'shamelessness' of the catastrophe that transmuted it into something hard to render as fictionally resonant, and perhaps perversely, it is failure that the novelist should be aiming for:

it is quite designedly as far as one can tell, an atrocity for the mass communication age. It was meant to be vulgarized, it was meant to be an event on television screens all around the world. It was a Show, which is one of the terrifying things about it. And it does have that effect then of potentially paralyzing the describer who says 'Am I then just colluding in another round of the show business side of 9/11?' The horror of the *Shoah* is something that you peel away the coverings from bit by bit and you think you've got to the worst, and then there's more - that sense of

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<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, *Writing in the Dust: Reflections on 11<sup>th</sup> September and its aftermath* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002), pp. 79-80.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, pp. 5-6.

horrified discovery that begins with the troops going into Belsen and slowly enlarges as Auschwitz, Dachau and Birkenau come in. Whereas this is shameless. And I suspect that this is another challenge for the novelist. [...] But if I were exploring that area I think what I might look for is the exemplary failure – the novel that somehow registers the scale of the disturbance, like something on a pressure graph, so that there is enough of a jolt. In our lifetimes this has probably been one of the major imaginative disruptions. And whether or not it's on the same level as the *Shoah* – well, on one level it's obviously not. It's not about six million people being butchered and killed in cold blood. But it is for our generation probably the biggest jolt. [...] Faced with the blatant the novelist may well say that what I have to do is to be oblique. Faced with the oblique the novelist may well have the duty to be blatant. And 9/11 is blatant.<sup>4</sup>

The notion of the 'exemplary failure' will continue to be a powerful one, in part because for those who experienced the day directly, the trauma continues to resonate. Even for those who did not, there are frequent reminders of 9/11's disruptive power whenever and wherever attacks occur. The 7/7 bombings in London, the Boston Marathon bombings, the murder of Drummer Lee Rigby<sup>5</sup>, the suicide attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq; each was followed, inevitably and swiftly, by an invocation of the 9/11 assaults. It is not surprising therefore, that 9/11's synecdochal force should continue to act as both lure and snare for the artist. It is worth noting that despite Rowan Williams' tolerance and intellectual power, he is still marked by his experiences. I asked him if he feels wounded, but that is not the word he chooses, finally:

The word I would use is scarred rather than wounded. I know that when my memory goes back to that day, it flinches and there's still a near impossibility to get close to what was going on. But I was very protected. I didn't see the worst. But I suppose just that sense of being nearer death than I have ever been and the sheer intensity of it all. And that's there. It's just there. And I know that. And I know also what I feel when I see

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<sup>4</sup> Rowan Williams interviewed by Charlie Lee-Potter, April 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Lee Rigby was murdered near Woolwich Barracks in south east London in May 2013.

images on television – planes going.... – I can't, I just can't. It's a trigger for me...<sup>6</sup>

However, for those of us who did not see what he and others did on 11 September 2001, and as the day slips from close-up to mid-view, it has become somehow more manageable, more definable. It looms a little less large than it did, and for this reason it appears to be more containable within and by art. To use Frank Bascombe's phrase, it has assumed a more 'human scale'<sup>7</sup> than it had at first. The old stricture that I touched on earlier in the work, Virginia Woolf's counsel that the close-up would present novelists with a 'painful jolt in the perspective', turned out to be prescient in its definition of the difficulties of rendering 9/11 in artistic form. Not that she could have imagined a novelistic responsibility to respond quite so swiftly as future novelists would be expected to do. But neither could those future novelists have imagined an event that would prove to be so traumatic and so testing to render in artistic form. For those who continue to maintain that 9/11 cannot or even should not be fictionalized, Rowan Williams points to the plea made to the poet Anna Akhmatova, whose son was being held in prison during the years of Nikolai Yezhov's reign at the NKVD, the Soviet secret police. Akhmatova queued in the snow outside the prison with others who were trying to find out the fate of their relatives:

In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror, I spent seventeen months in the prison lines of Leningrad. Once, someone 'recognized' me. Then a woman with bluish lips standing behind me, who, of course, had never heard me called by name before, woke up from the stupor to which everyone had succumbed and whispered in my ear (everyone spoke in whispers there):

'Can you describe this?'

And I answered: 'Yes, I can.'

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Ford, *The Lay of the Land* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 485.

Then something that looked like a smile passed over what had once been her face.<sup>8</sup>

There is an ambivalence to Akhmatova's words; a resonant sense of duty to describe the horror, a conviction that it would be done, and yet combined with a '...but how?' That obligation clearly resonates with Williams. It is the reason, I would suggest, why he has finally resolved to speak about his experience of 9/11. More than a decade later he exemplifies, in a fragmentary way of course, the evolutionary path that novelists have explored. He could not speak about it, but now he has elected, perhaps even forced himself, to do so. Finally, novelists have pulled away, in a distinct temporal shift, from the faltering present tense pledge that 'Yes, I can, but how?' and elected to pursue the future tense trajectory of 'Yes, I will.' Kevin Marsh's invocation, cited at the outset of this work, that novelists who responded immediately in essays and non-fiction were denying themselves the one commodity that they needed, which was time, turns out to have been wise. The old idea, voiced by Audrey Niffenegger, of 'nodding at' 9/11 has grown tired, the 'love-spectrum' was an exhausted mode before it began, the neurotic fumbling for artistic expression has faded from view, and the 'swift and easy' journalistic response cited by Richard Ford is out of date. It is the wide sweep of history and the landscape of the extraterritorial, combined with an eye-line set on the future that has produced the richest and most assured ground for novelists. Ironically, it would perhaps have been the surest territory for journalists, commentators, politicians and world leaders too.

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<sup>8</sup> Anna Akhmatova, 'Instead of a Preface', Leningrad, 1 April, 1957, *Requiem, The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, trans. Judith Hemschemeyer, ed. Roberta Reeder (1997: Brookline, MA: Zephyr Press, 2006).

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## APPENDIX 1

## Transcript of interview with Eric Fischl, 25 November 2008

CLP: The response was visceral and furious and there were even threats of retribution against you. Can you understand the public's violent dislike of *Tumbling Woman*?

EF: As for people's reactions, mostly they were fuelled by some journalists who wrote absurd stuff about my intentions. Their words fanned the panic/pain of the public. It was a mob mentality. They were looking for an easy target. It was ridiculous but unstoppable. There was no reasoning. It was truly hysterical. The piece that Andrea Peyser wrote described the work in such a way that it was clear she actually had never seen it except through photos. Her graphic description of imagined gore made the work seem dangerous and insensitive. It was nothing of the kind.

CLP: What was it that eventually calmed the public's response after the sculpture first appeared in public?

EF: Time is what mostly has changed the response to *Tumbling Woman*. Time and context. When the original work was displayed at Rockefeller Center perhaps it was too soon after 9/11? Perhaps it was that it went up unannounced so the public had no time to prepare for the experience of seeing it? One thing I heard more than once was that it would have been okay if it had been shown in a gallery or museum. I guess they meant that art needs a context of art to make it understandable or maybe just to make it safe? I was feeling that 9/11 was a public event and a shared event. I did not want my response to be limited to an art audience. It was important for me to get the work out into a public arena.

CLP: What conclusions have you reached about the difficulties of attempting to memorialize 9/11?

EF: The problem with trying to confront and ultimately remember or memorialize 9/11 is that there were all these people dead and no bodies. The people simply disappeared. The only media coverage in the States that had images of people were the jumpers and that was immediately censored. The mourning turned to the loss of architecture as a way of expressing the depth of our grief. Everything focused on the Twin Towers as a symbol of our great loss. When I introduced a figure into our memorializing event it was seen as an act of selfishness, careerism and cruelty. The public was not ready to openly share and mourn the losses of human beings.

CLP: Do you still have hopes that *Tumbling Woman* may be allowed to reappear, to attempt to memorialize in the future?

EF: I would love to see *Tumbling Woman* find it way back into the public arena. My dream would be to have it placed at the site but I will not hold my breath on that one.

CLP: Do you think that if you had insisted that *Tumbling Woman* stay that the public's reaction would have been tamed or calmed?

EF: As to regrets about agreeing to have it removed, I have no regrets. I had no control over it. It was not my decision and though I protested it and tried to reason with Jerry Speyer I was not in a position to insist. The work was not a public commission. It was not a site-specific work. Speyer had graciously allowed me to install it temporarily in Rockefeller Center. Neither one of us anticipated such a fevered negative response. He was just as shocked as I was.

CLP: What might the tempering effect of time be? Will the passage of time change the reaction to the sculpture?

EF: Every art form has its own time to gestate and to create. Every artist has his own time to digest an experience as well. Photo and video were on the scene as it unfolded. They captured simultaneously the event. The other arts needed more time to be made. It is not surprising that literature took over a year to begin to come out. Probably more like 3 years. 7 years later and you are beginning to see a great deal of work in all kinds of mediums being done. 9/11 was a huge event and turning point for us and it will not go away. Artists will be trying to figure it out for a very long time.

NOTE: On 1 April 2013 I spoke to Eric Fischl again to ask him if anything had changed in terms of the public's response to *Tumbling Woman*. His answer was: 'nothing has changed with regards to *Tumbling Woman's* public presence, though it has entered the lexicon through many articles and theses about censorship, art, and 9/11. So it has some currency.'

## APPENDIX 2

### Transcript of interview with Richard Ford, 27 November 2012

CLP: In your essay about Hurricane Katrina in which you referred to 9/11 too, you said that we still don't have the vocabulary to define a city's loss. Will we always lack the words?

RF: Yes I wrote something in that essay about being beyond the reach of empathy. A lot of people complained to me about that. Not that it made any difference to me. What I was trying to get across was that sometimes things happen and they eradicate your vocabulary by which you might be able to express those things.

CLP: But at least we're still attempting to say what needs to be said. I didn't have a sense that you were conceding defeat, but rather that you were trying to find an alternative method to define the scale of the catastrophe.

RF: I wasn't conceding defeat. But I guess that you can write and concede defeat and once you concede defeat you still have to finish what you write, so your defeat is transcended by whatever it is that you wanted to say

CLP: Do you find it surprising the number of people that didn't seem to realize that you had written a novel about the great losses of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina in *The Lay of the Land*?

RF: *The Lay of the Land* is specifically a 9/11 novel, albeit from the temporal 'advantage' of thinking of America *before* the calamity. The fact that it's my 9/11 novel may not be apparent – it wasn't to many people – but that was my intent. It was a political novel so it doesn't surprise me that people didn't understand. Because Americans aren't interested in politics. They want only to have to pretend to be interested in it once every four years. The inter-relationships between what we should have known before 9/11 and how shocked we were when 9/11 happened – those kind of things are things that Americans simply do not want to think about at all because it implicates us in our own fates. So no, I was *sorry* but I wasn't surprised. Also, I kind of wonder if I wasn't a little post facto in that way of thinking about the book. Maybe I didn't get completely articulate about it until after the book was finished. When I started to write the book I realized that I couldn't write about the specifics of 9/11 because it was too soon, it was still in the provenance of journalists I thought, and for me, using my clumsy metaphor, events have to sink into the ground and percolate back up through the shoes of people like me. So I was always thinking that I will write about what happened before 9/11 because I can see almost everything that everybody thought and everything that happened in 9/11 presaged in what happened before. Intellectually and even aesthetically that's a hard ticket for people to punch. They don't want to know about that. Do people have to know about Ulysses to care about Joyce? I don't think so. My intentions maybe never got to the surface.

CLP: It was clear to me, but not overt. Did you feel there were expectations of you, along with Auster, McEwan and DeLillo for example, that you had a duty to write a 9/11 novel?

RF: I didn't feel any sense of that.

CLP: So what was it that drove you to do it?

RF: I don't remember. The materials that I was drawing on temporally were those materials – which is to say, what happened in those years leading up to 9/11 and without completely wanting the book to be undertaking such a task, I just undertook such a task somewhat subliminally.

CLP: It's interesting that when people were talking to you about the novel, you became more precise and overt in your descriptions of it afterwards than you were possibly in the text itself.

RF: And I'm always suspicious about that because mostly what writers will tell you after a book is published is what they've decided their intention was and if they can give their book a nice burnish with a clear intention, it makes the book seem more cohesive and more purposeful than it ever seemed to be. Although it did seem to me to be the purpose that I had. It was entirely a feeling of having to write about this because I can't write about that. I'm not smart enough, I don't have the vocabulary, I don't know what I think about it. So I just ran away from that and that's what I ran to.

CLP: You ran away from the specifics of the day or the aftermath?

RF: Yes. I mean, in the most jejune kind of terms. *Falling Man* for instance, I couldn't have brought myself to write about that. It's the same way I can't write about my wife. I can't surround that experience in any kind of way to be able to render it.

CLP: I've been looking at the very interesting pamphlet that your British publisher produced for your UK publicity tour for *The Lay of the Land*. You changed the text afterwards, after Hurricane Katrina and it became much more ominous, dark, threatening. Were you conscious of that?

RF: Yes. You make those kinds of distinctions, consonant with what you instinctually feel and I instinctually felt differently when that little pamphlet got published. And you look at it later and you think, well that's not dramatic enough. It isn't a matter of saying that's not how I felt or how I feel. Who cares about that? It's just what you'll say, what you're willing to take credit for having said. And I felt more comfortable having the opportunity to take the credit for that rather than what I had felt before.

CLP: I was thinking, reading it over and over, that something had crept into the text. Although it was subliminally about 9/11, suddenly the sorrow of Hurricane Katrina had crept in. The pamphlet was before and the published novel came after. You make references to the viewpoint of someone looking down from above on characters. Was that in any way a reference to George Bush flying above the floods?

RF: That's your cultural historian, crit. lit. hat that you're talking through. I have no answer to that. Oh no. I've never thought about that. Now that you've said it, maybe I will think about it a little bit. But I would also have to go and read those passages again and there's almost nothing that could make me do that. But we're not talking about my intention here. We're talking about your intelligence in trying to connect things that seem important. I don't have to take credit for it.

CLP: I'm interested in the process. I can see why you're not consciously aware of doing it, although I'm sure that's what happened. Does it matter?

RF: This is interesting to me. It isn't what I was thinking. It's just what I wrote.

CLP: How does that process work?

RF: Um. Intuitively, instinctually. In terms of my own writing process, in terms of what I've organized in little 3 by 5 cards for that day's writing and how I string these little bits and pieces together and create little ligatures between sentences and ideas and exclamations and things like that. It almost never subscribes to what I'm thinking. I'm usually not thinking anything.

CLP: That's hard to imagine, given the precision of the prose.

RF: You know that Frost said that art, talking about poetry, is the last vestige of our childhood. We must do it as irresponsibly as we can. I have that printed on my brain.

CLP: Are you fearful that you might get it wrong or that you could lose the capacity to say what needs to be said.

RF: That's a paradigm that I don't subscribe to. I never think about what needs to be said. I do think about getting it wrong, but in that regard getting it wrong is not comparing what I write to some model or to some paradigmatic ideal. It's just that I write it and I think do I like that, and if I like that and I'm willing to keep it, (and being willing to keep something is obviously a complex kind of thing in which you ask yourself, do I want in the mind of the reader to take credit for having said that.) But that's as far as it goes. I mean when I finished a novella called *Occidentals* I put my head in my hands after I wrote the last sentence and I said 'what is wrong with you?' Why would you write this? And I just thought - well, I did.

CLP: On what level was it wrong?

RF: It was so unredeemed, it was so bleak. Somebody could say, 'well it came out of bleak time in your life.' Well it came out of a bleak and also an exhilarating time in my life. So I don't try to hold those things up to compare.

CLP: Do you try to include a sense in your fiction of there being a redemptive function?

RF: Well I think that any piece of fiction, any piece of art, has a redemptive function in the most basic ways. That it directs the reader's attention away from

whatever he's thinking about, to something else, and says, in a kind of appeal, look at this, look at that. And that redeems the moment. Taking your mind off whatever it is, good, bad. [...] And then there is the notion that 'this was made for you'. I've made it as well as I can make it. And then there is the notion that there will implicitly be a future in which these things will live on and you can have access to them again and so in all of those fundamental ways they seem redemptive. But it needn't be that you get to the end of the novel and the birds come down and Heidi comes down from the mountain,

CLP: Again, this reminds me of your invocation of Thornton Wilder in your journalistic piece about the memory of the dead living on after death.

RF: I have no memory of having written that. I think I know what you're talking about but I don't remember writing that.

CLP: It sounded so similar to the words that Tony Blair chose to read in New York after 9/11.

RF: I haven't read a review since 1990. It's too hard. It's not that I'm too grand. It's just too hard. To have to carry all that shit around in your head all the time. I like to have moments when there's nothing in my head. I gave this lecture last night. I had been not sweating it, but I had been thinking about it for 9 months and I got home last night and I hardly even drink, but I came in last night and I had a drink at the bar. And I thought, this is all I can think of to do. It was my one celebratory moment and it was pathetic to have a glass of shitty white wine in that room right over there. It was a little bleak but it was just me, myself and I you know. That was enough. I inadvertently read one review of *Canada* which was the very first review and it was dismissive. It basically said there is nothing interesting in this book and I don't know why the publisher is getting all up on a soapbox about it, there's nothing in it and it's just ridiculous. And so to prove my mettle and my adulthood I said 'that's just not true.' I knew it wasn't true. And then a friend of mine wrote me and said I'm so mad about that review in *Publishers' Weekly* and he said some time or other we're all dismissed - and I dismissed him at that point. I said how dare you write to me about a bad review. You're now off my list of friends. I haven't spoken to him since. I haven't had the chance to explain this to him yet. But I hope that in the silence he has worked it out. I like friction and I like conflict.

CLP: Why do you seek conflict?

RF: I'm getting old for it but I *really* liked it when I was young. Um hmm. Fights. Verbal. Physical. I liked it. Because when I was young I got kind of rendered slightly cowardly in a fight and I realized that it was so much worse to be rendered cowardly than it was to just take a licking. And I just thought to myself, God, administering a licking - it's great, compared to feeling ashamed of yourself. I put my nose right into the middle of everything.

CLP: So the fight you describe that Frank Bascombe gets into in the bar, that's based on a real fight of your own?

RF: Frank's fight was one of my fights. You bet. I had lots of those. No matter how fights start, they always seem to start quickly. They're not for everybody.

When I came back from Canada last month, I came into a little town called Turner, Montana, which is about as big as this room. But it had a bar. And my friend and I, my hunting partner, we went into the bar to make a phone call. And I had an Obama button on my hunting jacket and this guy he come up to me and he came up to me and he said 'what the fuck do you mean wearing an Obama button into a bar like this.' And I said 'I'm sorry. I think he's the President of the United States. He said 'he's a nigger. He's a fucking nigger. He's going to ruin this country. And I just went right at the guy and my friend grabbed me. I was going to punch the guy and I thought to myself – you're going to get killed here. These were all big old sock buster guys in cowboy boots. They would have stomped me. And it was one of the few times in my life when I thought to myself 'God, I'm so glad nothing bad happened.' I said to him 'you're a silly motherfucker, aren't you?' And he said an amazing thing. He said 'I *am* a silly motherfucker.' It was kind of slightly deflating. It took me aback a little bit. That's not the code. You're supposed to say, 'who do you think you are' and then off things go. It is funny. My instincts are all to fight. My instincts are all to mix it up. But I'm too old for it now.

CLP: How does the desire to punch people fit in with redemptive writing?

RF: Think of Ruskin again. Composition is the arrangement of unequal things. There's something very aggressive about writing a book, something very aggressive about writing a poem, something about writing an essay, which basically wants to say to people, 'no, no, no stop what you're doing. Do this. Quit doing this. Do that. There's something abrading about that. Whatever you're doing that's interesting, look what I did. I don't want to dominate the room, but there is an impulse to want to control stuff. I like to control stuff. Control the material. The novel is good when there's no discrepancy between what the novelist is meaning for you to understand and what you understand. If there's a big discrepancy, something is wrong. I try to write sentences that don't let you out. [...] I mistrust my verbal ability. Whereas when I read a guy like [John] Banville, you might say that he is a person with a florid vocabulary but I'm in ecstasy when I'm reading it. And I think to myself – I wish I could do that. Because it never seems to lose its mooring. It seems to always be just enough, right on the edge, but it doesn't go over.

CLP: He might say he'd like to be you.

RF: He might say that but it wouldn't be true.

CLP: But you must have read his review of *Canada*.

RF: No, if you can't read the bad ones you can't read the good ones. I have no curiosity. [...].

CLP: I'm sure the Mayo clinic must love the fact that you write about them more than any other novelist.

RF: I try my best. It's heaven for me. That's where I will go when I die. It's this great Olympus for salubrity which I like. I like to go to a place where all of my worries can be addressed. It's a huge institution. It's like the British Museum. It's gigantic.

CLP: Is that why you needed Frank to go there?

RF: Well, Richard went there in that instance. So Frank went with him. What happens to me is that I think it will be really fun, or whatever fun might be, to describe a place or dedicate sentences to a place as though I were describing it. That's why part of *Independence Day* and all of *The Lay of the Land* happened on the Shore, which is of course now gone. Because I wanted to locate things there. It didn't have any other particular interest for me other than I went there and had a good time and I thought it would be fun to take Frank there. I've been to the Mayo Clinic various times. That's where I got my throat cut, in the Mayo Clinic. So I thought I have to write about this place because I like it. I need to set something there.

CLP: Do you have a sense of regret, poignancy about the damage now done to the Shore?

RF: Those houses aren't there anymore. I was glad that nobody asked me to write about it. They asked somebody else to do it. Which made me glad because I would have felt a kind of urge to do it. And then I would have had to go down there. It's amazing those books you know, in particular *The Lay of the Land*. They didn't make many ripples in the culture. They have their admirers but they haven't made much of an impact. It's just how it is. Maybe abroad more than in the US. It's not that I'm begging them to. It's just that you do twenty years of work and you have some sense of what difference it's made in the world. I know it's made some difference and that's really great. But look, it's never made an exalted difference. I work in the same vein as Cheever. I work in the same vein as Updike. They're better than I am. And I'm good with that. I work in the same vein as Richard Yates and Frank O'Connor. That's all. To get to do it at all is wonderful, wonderful. I wouldn't mind, you know, when Stephen Spender wrote an essay in which he said, talking about Auden and Louis MacNeice and people like that, he lived at a time in which everybody was a better writer than he was. And that's ok. In Spender's case I think he was right. Although he wrote some pretty good poems. And in my case I think it's probably right. But if one does one's best, I think that's good enough. I always think, when I win a prize, that it's because Philip Roth had an off year.

CLP: Why are you relieved that no one asked you to write journalistically about the Shore?

RF: It would have been taking the novels too literally. They would have been taking the novels as though the novels were a sort of report on events there, especially *The Lay of the Land*, instead of being as novels are – some little bits of them can be reportage, but it's mostly made-up stuff and you try to make it consonant enough with what a person would see if the person went to those places, just so that it would seem plausible enough to be able to do all the other things you may want to do. Plausible enough to get the reader leaning in your direction so that you can work on him in the way that you want to work on him.

CLP: So it doesn't matter if it isn't true, it's just what you say and how you say it?



RF: It doesn't matter at all. There doesn't need to be an England for Constable to paint.

CLP: Did anyone write about the Shore factually that made you think it's an insight that I didn't have before?

RF: I don't remember – I really don't remember. Once I write about something I don't much care what anybody else says. People are always sending me books which are on subjects that the editor believes I will like because I've written about something similar. Nothing could be further from the truth. I'm most likely going to throw those away. Or give them to the library. Because I'm done with that. The suburbs. Or the New Jersey shore. Or Montana. Or Americans in Paris. Any of those things. I'm much more apt to want to read Seamus [Heaney] about growing up in Derry.

CLP: As the three novels in *The Sportswriter* trilogy develop, there is a growing sense of the 'real'. Do you think your writing has become more solidly real?

RF: I'm unaware of that. The only way I can connect with that at all is to say that my own personal vocabulary about describing things – windows and trees and mountains and things like that has been illuminated by realising that it isn't the thing that matters so much as the language that I use to refer to the thing. So that I've taken more pleasure in the language and so maybe that makes me a little bit more addicted to seeming to write about things because I'm really interested in the words. [...]

CLP: In that sense do things happen accidentally?

RF: Up to a point. But then you have to read the sentence and say to yourself, 'ok I like it, but do I want to be responsible as the man who said that? Do I want to be responsible as the writer of that line that goes into the reader's brain?' Sometimes you do, sometimes you don't. Sometimes you want to be the guy who wrote a better line.

CLP: You said about *Canada* that you had a sort of sequence of events that you wanted to happen and you then had to find a way to let it happen.

RF: Yes, the ligatures. The connective tissues. I wanted to get to that scene in which the two guys got killed. So I just kept pecking away at it and pecking away at it to make something happen.

CLP: Does it annoy you that readers fixate on events? The fact that they ask you 'What happens to Frank?' when you've said all you want to say and, in any case, the events are less important than the ideas?

RF: No, no, no. It doesn't bother me at all. It's the spectator who makes the picture. So if they have a lingering and ongoing curiosity about something and they pose that question to me, I'm fine with that. I try to answer the question. People ask me 'what's Frank doing now' and I say he isn't doing anything. There is no Frank.

CLP: When readers ask 'does Frank die?' what do you reply?

RF: Well, we all do. Frank lives in a big, thick notebook in my freezer. I have enough to write two more novels if I wanted to.

CLP: Why does he live in the freezer?

RF: I met this wonderful child last night named Ali Smith and one of the things that we agreed about is that we keep all our important papers in the freezer.

CLP: Is it a metaphor?

RF: I don't think of it as metaphorical. Just, if the house burns down the freezer will probably not burn. I put them in plastic so they don't get all wet. There's lots and lots of Frank left.

CLP: Lots of Frank after he has descended from the 'plane at the end of *The Lay of the Land*, or lots of him along the way to that point?

RF: I don't know. I have to commit to that more than I am capable. They're just notes. Something that I wrote down. I put F.B. and I circle it in my notebook. Something that he would say or he would think or something that would interest him. Or something that someone would say that he would respond to. Or something that might happen – anything like that.

CLP: And when did you last write F.B. in the column?

RF: Wednesday. My dog died so I sat down and I wrote down some notes that Frank might think if *his* dog died. It was very sad. He was old. He was 15 and a half years old. Nonetheless I wrote that down. Pirated poor Scooter's demise and gave him to Frank.

CLP: Will Frank appear again? It surely must be possible otherwise you wouldn't have F.B. in the margin.

RF: That's a logic that I don't subscribe to. Finishing *The Lay of the Land*, was, until I finished *Canada*, the hardest thing I ever did. And I certainly wouldn't want to get involved in something that hard again. And so I would have to be able to dream up something that would be easier, knowing full well that the finishing of a novel – the six months in which you're editing it – the reading it until you're blue in the face, is always going to be horrible. I would have to come upon something that was short, sort of like Updike's little novella that he wrote at the end of the Rabbit trilogy. He wrote four. He wrote that one practically posthumously. A scintillating little novella. If I could think of something like that to do, I would just do it. Because I know there's a readership out there for it. If I wrote something that was good and it would make people who care about those things think that they had something to read.

CLP: But they would always want more.

RF: But if I have him die... It's hard to have a first person narrator die.

CLP: But you have Wally in Book 3 who died twice, and another Wally in Book 1 who dies too. So I suppose Frank could do the triple.

RF: Yes, I could. That was completely inadvertent by the way. Who is Wally in Book 3?

CLP: He's Sally's dead husband who disappears.

RF: Oh. Really? I must have just liked the name. I never go back to those books and look at them again.

CLP: They're both called Wally and they both kill themselves.

RF: That's good. I like that. But I didn't realize. So much for scholarship. That's the kind of thing an editor should say. But they didn't. I'm just a regular, plug-along kind of human being. If someone had said there's Wally here and there's Wally there I would have changed that. If you look in Carver stories there are all kinds of people who have similar names or sometimes even the same name. He had an affinity for certain names, just as I have an affinity for certain names. But it doesn't matter. That's the part of writing fiction that I don't really worry about very much. *The Lay of the Land* was published in 2006 and now it's 2012 and this is the first time I've heard about that. You've been reading very carefully and I'm sorry to deflate you but it is important that your scholarship have some tincture of the actual writing tasks. I could say wryly – you caught that, did you, oh you're on to me now – but that would only mislead you. I don't think it stops you drawing attention to it. I mean, it's there. Ford says there's nothing, but we all know that he's the last person to know, to have any credibility about his own books.

CLP: Would you need to have something important to say about the world to get Frank out of the freezer?

RF: I think so. I think so. Obama's presidency has been the most important historical event of my adult life. That and the civil rights act of 1965. So I don't see how that could elude me, but at the same time I don't think anything very interesting about it. I haven't thought much about Obama – this is the kind of thing that would get into Frank's head. I've only thought one thing about Obama, maybe two. I wouldn't like to meet him. He could never see me and I have no wish to meet somebody just so that I can meet *them*. I don't hold it against him. Bill Clinton for instance is a guy I know a little bit. We come from the same part of the world - Arkansas. It's hard for him to see me. There's something about the presidency that makes the rest of the world always seem at a distance and necessarily so. And I don't in any way complain about that. But it would be for me – I can just as easily be unseen in my living room. I voted for Obama, I wanted him to be president. The fact that he is president and voted in twice is the most important thing in my life. But I don't know the guy and probably wouldn't even like him. He's pious. He's pious. And Bill is pious too but in his own folksy, don't leave me alone in a room with your wife kind of way – that takes a little of that piety away.

CLP: If Romney had won, would that have needed writing about?

RF: It would have been a lot easier to write about. It would have been a calamity. I wrote something about it in the FT, just a little squib really of about 400 words. I was interested in what would happen to the Republican Party, if he lost or if he won. What would have happened if he had won would have meant that a whole bunch of really bad things would have happened almost immediately. But that didn't happen, so. I guess you could write about it, but politics to me in those books, it's finger pointing towards politics and allusions to politics. But I sort of subscribed to the notion of George Eliot in *Felix Holt* that all private lives are prefigured by public lives. And I don't know if I think it's exactly prefigured, but it's worth saying that they're related. Connected. A connection *can* be made, even if it's not made. It's implicit rather than explicit. I'm saying this is going on here, that's going on there – do you see anything?

CLP: What made you want to write about Canada?

RF: I just wanted to write a novel set in Canada so that I could ponder it. And try to say, and not very well, that for Dell it was restorative. He says about Canadians that they think they need to understand things. Americans think they don't. No, they really don't. Americans just have to do stuff. Do this and think about it later. Romney is a good example. If anybody had actually stopped and thought about what was going to happen nobody would have cared for him. But they didn't give a shit. They just didn't want this black guy. Yes, it is depressing – very depressing. The most depressing thing. There was a poll before the elections. Americans said that they understood that in their hearts there were certain racist feelings. 51% of them agreed to that. 51% of those polled admitted to having racist views, holding racist views. And they reckoned there was about another 7 or 8% who implicitly held racist views but did not say so. I found that to be one of the most dispiriting things I ever heard. And then I walked into that bar and hear this guy saying 'nigger this' and 'nigger that', I just wanted to jump out of the window. I felt that if Romney was elected that Kristina and I would probably have to, as an act of protest, leave America and go live somewhere else and I don't feel any less that way now. I don't know if I would have the nerve to go now because it would require such a dismantling of a life and I like where I live. But I feel such a sense of dishearten about America, even with Obama as President. I was really afraid the liberals were gonna abandon him after the first debate in which he 'disappointed' them. Their boy, their boy - they felt so proud of themselves for voting for a black man. And then he gets up on that stage and doesn't act like they want him to act. But he just had a bad day. But you can't have a bad day if you're 'our boy'.

CLP: How would you write redemptive fiction about those sorts of issues, given your level of dismay?

RF: Well you have to feel that there is something to be written. But my dismay, my dismay alone is probably not for me provocation enough to write something. But if you can feel that maybe that dismay had in itself the seeds of something that might allay the dismay, that you might feel a kind of a commotion about it - Seamus was talking about this in his Nobel speech, some possibility that you can't quite see and feel, then I might do it.

CLP: But you don't feel that way at the moment?

RF: I'm not really thinking about it, not consciously. But that's my general way of working. When I wrote *The Sportswriter*, Kristina said to me 'why don't you write about somebody who's happy? She said 'you've written these two novels about people who are so profoundly *unhappy*'. And I thought it was a really good idea. And I sat down and I thought, how can I write about somebody who's happy? And the only way I could figure out how to do it would be to deposit someone who was unhappy – his wife had left him, his kid had died, living alone – and find a way for him to make a transit to some better state. Which I did. I did do that.

CLP: But then you sent him all awry in Books 2 and 3

RF: I had to find something to say. The agency of the writer is a man, who, having nothing to say, finds something to say. I wasn't trying to make it bleak. I was trying to make it dramatic, trying to make the dramas, the bad side of the dramatics, overcome-able. Yeah. Through the agency of writing about it. For me, I fail at this sometimes. I'm always looking for something to say. What can I say? What can I say good. What can I say that will pull this out of the fire? Sometimes, in short stories, I just fail. I don't figure out what to say.

CLP: Is that why you couldn't write very specifically about 9/11?

RF: No. I might have found that to be true, if I had tried. But I didn't have the feeling that there was anything in the 9/11 events that even though they were as dramatic as they were, it didn't create that sense of commotion in me. That 'something kicking in my soul. You know, if you live long enough it will. Once it gets outside the purchase of other writers, of journalism, it maybe will.

CLP: Events themselves were certainly sufficient to cause commotion. Do you know what it was that didn't provoke the commotion that would make you write?

RF: No.

CLP: Have you read any 9/11 novels?

RF: I started to read DeLillo, and then it didn't interest me very much so I just set it aside. McInerney's I didn't read. Maybe, without even knowing why I say this, there are so many more ways to go wrong than to go right. One of the things that you do when you write a novel is that basically you commandeer and dominate it and you subordinate it to your own uses. And I guess I haven't thought that there was anything about 9/11 that I could sufficiently subordinate to my own uses. Because of the scale of the event or the fact that it's so 'known' and partly because it seems to be more heavy lifting than I felt able to do. In the ten plus years since then I've been writing a novel almost all of the time and I just didn't get around to it. I might. But I find myself thinking, really, really? Write that?

CLP: Have you looked at Paul Auster and his time experiments?

RF: Paul Auster doesn't interest me as a writer. I just don't want to read him. It's hard enough to see this table, and then to have to imagine it's not here. I just

don't want to read it. It's a perfectly reasonable aesthetic way of finding something to write about, but I just don't want to read it.

CLP: And Claire Messud?

RF: I haven't read it and I need to read it because she's a writer who interests me. She's smart and her first books were a little too ornate for me but she's smart and I saw her a while ago and she seemed different. She's been around a little bit and she has a keen intelligence. I will read it. But I won't finish it if I don't like it. Throw it across the room. Throw it in the fireplace. I read a lot but I don't read it in an orderly way, like I was a stakeholder in any way. I just read.

CLP: Have you read Mohsin Hamid's work?

RF: No. That wears me out.

CLP: If journalists have failed, it seems from what you're saying that so too has fiction.

RF: It's too soon. They jumped on it too soon. It was too soon then.

CLP: As I was re-reading the passage that describes the demolition of the Queen Regent hotel in *The Lay of the Land*, I couldn't help but see the connections between the Towers collapsing and the hotel collapsing. Did I imagine that?

RF: You're not imagining that. It's there. And I knew that when I was writing it. I was very much taken by all of the film footage that I had seen of the way those implosions occur. Namely that you're watching this thing and then there are all these puffs of smoke from the bottom. They sink from the bottom down. They don't blow them up from the top down, they sink them from the bottom and the destructive element goes from the bottom up. That was the hotel I grew up in, in Little Rock. And I just thought, typical of me, that's something I'd like to put in my book. But the fact that it was reminiscent of, prescient of 9/11 is not lost on me.

CLP: Your use of architecture is interesting. Frank describes a certain kind of house, a particular style of architecture as a 'Thornton Wilder', but in the pre-publication pamphlet for *The Lay of the Land*, the house is described completely differently and you ascribe a different kind of architecture to it. Did you make the Thornton Wilders up?

RF: Yes. It's because I once acted in *Our Town*. I played George Gibbs in *Our Town* and we had a stage set with a certain kind of architecture. And in the course of a novel's trajectory, I ascribed the Thornton Wilder to that kind of architecture in an early draft. When I got around to finish it and knowing I had to take credit for it, I would hold the space up and get lot more precise about what I meant.

CLP: What does a house called a 'Thornton Wilder' evoke for you?

RF: Small town, cosy, fire in the fireplace, steak on the table. Home Town. Something conserving and redemptive, but that wouldn't be the thing I would stress. Are the suburbs redemptive? Frank makes noises sometimes like they were. But it's more a matter of him wanting to say the suburbs are here because we built them, we needed them. Their grasp on redemptiveness may exhaust. They finally prove to be unrealistic. They become less redemptive as the novels progress. I grew up in the suburbs and I kind of liked it there. And over the course of time, around 1990, I sort of thought, Christ, where's the fun here? My feelings changed. But I wanted Frank to be the kind of realist I like him to be, which is to say here it is, you made it, live with it, try to find something in it that you like. Try to articulate what it is that led you to make them. So in that sense they have redemptive potential.

CLP: But suburbs change personality. And so does Frank. He's a different person each time.

RF: Yes, he is. You come to the end of each book in which you encounter him and when I pick him up again at the beginning of another book and I don't want to look back at the other books and have to make him up again anew, with maybe relying on certain things that I remember, but there are some things I don't remember. The fact that he's Frank Bascombe in all three books is beside the point. It doesn't matter if he's blonde in one book and has black hair in the next. Or if he's African American. What I really wanted to do when I wrote *The Lay of the Land*, I wanted to make Frank an African American. But I didn't have the nerve. I thought that people might not tolerate it. I thought that people might say 'oh, come on. Don't be an idiot.'

CLP: Could he be an African American next time he comes out of the freezer?

RF: Maybe that's the way to deal with the Obama issue. Make Frank be black? Of course I would dare. If I could write something good, making it be that way, I would dare. Yeah, I would. It would be a nice tip of my hat to the Obama administration.

CLP: Is that your combative side coming out, the wish to have a fight?

RF: I wouldn't mind the fight. But I wouldn't want to fail at it. I wouldn't want it to be terrible. I wouldn't want the idea to be the only thing I had to draw on. Anybody can dream up an idea. I dreamed this idea up 15 years ago. I like to write about race. I like to get into people's face about race.

CLP: The references to race and the casual racism make me wince every time I read the books.

RF: Good, I wanted it to. There is casual racism in these books. Frank is casually racist sometimes. I wanted him to be. Most Americans don't like it that I use the word 'negro'. Negro doesn't need to be rehabilitated. It's a word that blacks use in America all the time. And I will not be unpermitted to use a word that they use. Plus, you know, in my will, whatever I have when I die, is going to be given to the United Negro College Fund. Absolutely. For a scholarship for some young African American kid in Mississippi. It's been destined that way for 15 years. But they call it the United Negro College Fund. And I have wrestled

with the New Yorker about them not wanting to use that word. And then I read this thing the other day about Kid Rock, this little moronic rocker from Detroit and he's 'nigger this' and 'nigger that'. It's larded all through this stuff, and I thought, wait a minute. I don't want to use *that* word. I just want to use 'negro', which seems to me to be perfectly acceptable but I've even heard black Americans say to me 'that word raises the hackles on my back when I hear a white person use it'. And I say 'well, tough shit. Get used to it, dude'. They know what they know. They feel what they feel. They're entitled to it. But it ain't anything to do with what I do. I get a lot of complaints from young, well-heeled upwardly mobile African Americans saying there's a word in those books that I don't like. And it's predictably 'negro'. And I say 'why don't you like it? King used it. It's used all through all kinds of legislation. What's your problem with it?' 'I don't know. I just don't like it.' 'Well tough shit. Shut up.'

CLP: Don't you care if people don't like you?

RF: No, I wish people would like me. But I can't always do enough to cause it. That's consistent with my feelings about myself. I will bend in your direction just so far, but I won't do any more. You're the same way. Journalism's role is to provide a view of the world upon which people can act. And for me, I'm more interested in providing a view of the world which shows you what *happens* when you act. And that's necessarily speculative. I love journalism. Because it's so easy and it's swift and it's probably not very good and I can pretend that it is. And write it and go about my business. With journalism you can get away with so little. I was talking to Tom Stoppard last night and he said, talking about journalism, that 'I used to think that if I've got to write about something, I've got to know a lot about it. But', he said, 'that's rubbish, rubbish.' You have a lot of rope to hang yourself with a novel.



## APPENDIX 3

### Transcript of interview with Kevin Marsh, 8 March 2013

CLP: You wrote an essay in which you laid out your complaints that journalism is constantly driving to find 'common framings', that it was trying to fit in with the audience's expectations, rather than saying the unexpected, the challenging. Why did you call the essay 'The Arab Spring did not take place'?

KM: It annoyed the hell out of me during the whole Arab Spring. It was absolutely evident that unless certain parts of the story fitted the decisions we'd already made in the BBC and everywhere else, then it didn't get on air. And it was because of that, that we told that particular story. That, hey, you know, look at this - Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain - they're all going to turn into Sweden tomorrow. They're all going to have fully fledged democracies. And then Libya came along and we said the same thing. It was like George Bush thought in 2003 that he was going to march into Baghdad on April 10<sup>th</sup> and by April 11<sup>th</sup> there'd be a fully working civil society, representative democracy and rights for women. So I was trying to think in that piece, that I'm as guilty of that as anyone. In order to edit any daily news programme it's a necessary tool. You have to say, what does this remind me of? What's the grand narrative this is part of? And of course that grand narrative - so many media scholars talk about it conspiratorially, as though there's someone out there, *them* - who decides the grand narrative? That's not how it happens. It happens consensually and because other editors make a decision, then you're more likely to make a decision. And so you have a reinforcing cycle. And the truth is that in order to get from 8 o'clock in the morning until 6 o'clock at night in daily news programmes, if you don't adopt that as a very important tool then you're not going to get anything on air. Or if you do get anything on air, no-one's going to take any notice of it, because it's not salient or it doesn't touch on the issues. And it is actually quite depressing, because you have that self-fulfilling cycle that you're never telling anyone anything that's absolutely new. You're telling them something that they sort of partly know already. If you did tell them something that was genuinely new it would be so left field that they couldn't deal with it. And you end up with something like this concept called the Arab Spring, which didn't happen. Thousands of different things happened and some things linked them. I suspect some historian at some point will show how a greater awareness of civil society or economics or something was more to do with it, than what we thought was happening. So that piece was a kind of *mea culpa*. I acknowledge that I'm as guilty of this as anyone and I'm not sure I could have done my job if it had been any other way. The problem is of course that journalism has taken to itself the idea that it writes the first draft of history and that's one thing it doesn't do. It's absolutely nothing to do with history.

CLP: There's a paradox in the final paragraph of your essay. It seems that if the journalist doesn't write the first draft of history, you're not entirely sure who does. Where does the balance lie?

KM: No, I'm not sure at all. That's why I used the Hemingway quote that the first draft of anything is shit. It does need that drafting, redrafting and redrafting idea that the novelist is obviously always doing. And also good historians to some extent. But I don't know where it does lie and I think the real risk is that you end up with a concept of something that happened and this is true of Hutton, true of Saville, true of all the big stories that stay with us. That once you have the script written for you and you settle that script down in your mind, the danger is that it never changes. And unlike historians or even novelists you can't come to it again. It's very difficult to come to it again and say 'I was probably wrong about that'. It's really hard to shift that perception.

CLP: But if it's true that journalists don't produce the first draft or even the first rough draft and you're not entirely sure who does, does it therefore matter too much what journalists do or don't say?

KM: Well only that there is that risk and I think it's a very real risk and it happens more often than not, that they solidify the perception of something and it's wrong or incomplete, unhelpful or potentially misleading. You know, the big, misleading perception after 9/11, which Bush latched onto because he wanted to for other reasons, was that Saddam had anything to do with it at all. If you polled people in America the first 12 months after 9/11, an increasing number of people thought that Saddam Hussein was connected with Al Qaeda. Outside the US the perception was of course entirely different. That was a great example of this idea of something being so meshed into the public mind. By journalists? I don't know. By politicians? I don't know. But it somehow got there. Certainly journalists in the US didn't do enough to dislodge it. And that then becomes a very dangerous fixed idea that no-one can get away from and I think this is part of the problem that not enough journalists or the administration itself said 'hang on a minute George, are you sure about that?'

CLP: What you're implying there then is that journalists do write a draft of history. You seem to be saying it's both true and untrue.

KM: Maybe it's just more fuzzy than that. Maybe what you have is this great wobbly mass of understanding. Journalism sits in one bit of it, probably distorting it slightly, - or quite a lot - and over here are people's conversations with each other and over here are weird things like memory. It's like the difference between the standard model of chemistry or physics and quantum physics. There's nothing fixed in all of this. If you mean by history the kind of Herodotus idea of history where I'm the man who travels the world and I talk to people and I write things down and it's up to you to make your mind up about it, that's quite close to journalism. If that's what you mean by history, then yes, journalists are the first rough draft. If by history you mean the much more Gibbon/Macaulay idea of sit down with the texts and make your judgments about which is true and which is false and you pursue the truth, then I don't think there's any way that journalism is moving in that direction. I've been listening to a lot of stuff about the tenth anniversary of the Iraq war and if you listen to Hugh Sykes whose reports are very rich, textured about the electricity supply or if a school is open or about market supplies, it's a completely different story from the one we can all deal easily with. Now you can either find it enchanting and engaging and rich because it's different or you don't really hear it because it doesn't answer the questions about whether it was right to attack

and invade Iraq, or did Saddam have WMD. It's much harder for that fuller, richer picture to break into all those grand narratives we've made for ourselves. That's where we become intellectually poorer because we find it hard to deal with the rich stuff as well as the fixed perceptions.

CLP: Does it make you despair?

KM: God, yes. I've always despaired about it.

CLP: Is daily news journalism an utterly futile endeavour in that case?

KM: Well there is something futile about it. If you take a really good interview with the guy or woman in charge of something, it's 1 o'clock, it's 5 o'clock, and you've got the person of the day who's running something and something really big is happening. You would do a completely different interview on Tuesday than on Monday and probably another different one on Wednesday. So there's nothing fixed about what accountability actually means or getting behind the facts. These are concepts we pride ourselves on, but it all depends on the tide. You know what's it like. If you'd been doing the Staffordshire hospital story, and different facts come out during the course of the week, you would do a completely different interview with the guy in charge depending on the day. So there are no absolutes and that does make me despair because at its worst, there's nothing really to differentiate between the good and the bad. Even if you as a journalist are trying to make it good.

CLP: Also there are different requirements. In your book [*Stumbling Over Truth*], you said that for John Humphrys [BBC Radio 4 Today presenter], one of his personal preferences is to have a good row. He regarded that as a sign of a good interview, without in every case producing an awful lot of light. So even defining what is a success or not is hard.

KM: When I was at Today, John and I had completely different ideas about what a successful interview was. I don't think either of us was right or wrong. John was right in the sense that roughing someone up just for the sake of it is part of the democratic process. Let's see how they do. I don't discount that. But I also know there's another aspect to it which is much more the Nick Clarke way, or Evan [Davis], who tries to fillet it really. But even that makes me despair. Because even someone who's a really good interviewer, would do a completely different interview in different circumstances and one might be very revealing and one might not be.

CLP: So is there any form of solution, although that's a very journalistic question. Is there any kind of formula to make it less exasperating?

KM: No, because it's a human thing. You can't write a computer programme to do journalism. You would iron out the imperfections and all crime stories that are roughly the same would turn out roughly the same. There are 300,000 people who take speeding points for someone else every year. We've only ever heard of one. Journalism is about that human element. That human frailty makes journalism interesting in the first place.

CLP: Aside from those vagaries, you're suggesting in your essay on Afghanistan that we seek the common framings in journalism because they're reassuring.

KM: That's why we never got down to the question of 'why are we doing this?' That's why I call it the 'unexamined war'. It was partly the politicians' fault, if you listen to extracts of the parliamentary debate. But it was lousy. You had senior politicians standing up, saying 'I don't know what we must do but we must do something'. And the press was like that as well. We used phrases like 'we've got to take down the Taliban'. What does that mean?

CLP: Do you see it as a triumvirate of failure – journalists, historians at some point and politicians all setting out the ground incorrectly?

KM: It's unarguably the case that everyone involved in that public discourse failed. Now there were people missing from that discourse – novelists, poets, dramatists, a lot of people. Keats called poets the 'unacknowledged legislators'. So a lot of people were missing. They came piling in later. But by then we'd fixed the key idea, which was that 'being in Afghanistan is a good thing.' The fact that we're still there twelve years later, three times as long as the European War to D Day, is extraordinary. All those phrases that come in like 'mission creep' – it isn't mission creep because there was no mission in the first place. Nobody knew why we were going in, so it was completely unexamined.

CLP: One of the difficulties seems to be the paucity of the lexicon. We reach for a cliché because it's comfy and cosy. But it's meaningless as well.

KM: We spent more time considering and correcting exactly what John Reid [then British Defence Secretary] meant when he said the mission to Helmand province would be 'without a shot being fired'. He was then reported promising there 'would not be a shot fired'. And we then spent two weeks deciding what that meant, as if that mattered.

CLP: You seem to be suggesting explicitly that ground was laid by journalists, historians and politicians. And by the time they were ready to hand on the discourse, novelists were left with the wrong one. They engaged with the wrong version of events.

KM: Yes, there is some of that. You could argue that within the public sphere it's the duty of novelists, poets, dramatists, songwriters to reject that and start again. That's what happened during the '80s with Thatcherism. In popular culture there was a mass rejection of even the grounds of debate that Thatcher was trying to establish. I think it's a really good example. The general thesis was that socialism and the trade unions were dead. And suddenly in the mid '80s you get popular culture saying 'no, absolutely not', the Billy Braggs etc. who were completely rejecting that. And that's what should happen. But I don't get the impression that's happening in our current state.

CLP: It's become a convention that when there's a big crisis, a big trauma, a big event of whatever sort, the programme editor says 'let's get Ian McEwan in or another novelist.' But if we look at the journalism done by the novelists at the time of 9/11 - McEwan, Amis, Ford, Auster – we find that McEwan's piece was

very similar to Ford's which was bizarrely very similar to the language used by Tony Blair at the memorial service in New York for the British dead. All of them drew on the Thornton Wilder idea that as long as there's love there will be a sufficient bridge to keep putting one foot in front of the other. All were seeking a similar kind of narrative, which was ultimately comforting but meaningless. Yet they all did it. Were they thereby immersing themselves in that preparation of the wrong ground, before they'd even started work on the novels?

KM: Yes they were. The right thing for McEwan to have said when asked to do that was no. Because when journalism crashes into fiction, or a journalist crashes into a novelist, one thing disappears from the equation, which is time. Surely the one thing that any novelist or artist needs is time, because you need that reflection, to go outside the concepts that you're happy with, familiar with, comfortable with. You need to step outside those and when you invite McEwan to write a piece or Salman Rushdie, you're almost saying 'we'd like you to be a novelist, but we're going to take away your most important tool which is time.'

CLP: Aren't you also taking away the second important tool, which is essentially to insist on having a different opinion? Because aren't we actively seeking the common framings at that point? We wouldn't have wanted McEwan or any other novelist after 9/11 saying 'there's a different way of looking at this.' We wanted it to be the same.

KM: Yes, and if you'd stepped right outside the framings you wouldn't have been heard. It might have been dropped or if it had gone out, it wouldn't have registered at all. This is the thing about audiences. They need to hear or to see, or to read things that allow them to have had a running start first. If you'd come at *Enduring Freedom*, the Afghan mission, entirely from the point of view of the confused peasant who didn't know that he or she wanted the country liberating, maybe people would have thought it was vaguely interesting but they wouldn't really have heard it. The many perspectives in Iraq certainly at the height of the danger up to the surge, it wasn't that we didn't hear about daily life, we didn't know what it felt like to be in that conflicted situation where on the one hand you were glad about some things but not happy that you were likely to be blown up by someone. You can do that politically in black and white terms of either being 'right' or being on the side of the bastards, but it's not just that it wasn't in the discourse, it's that you couldn't actually even put it there. And if you did, no one would hear it.

CLP: Isn't this a personal contradiction, because as an editor you were always acting to say the thing that wasn't being said, certainly when I was working with you anyway.

KM: But it was never far from the centre. You couldn't drift too far from the middle. And you certainly had to have one tent peg bashed firmly into the centre. It was just inevitable. Every morning meeting starts with what's already on the agenda – the papers, other programmes – so you're already, to use a horrible mixed metaphor, outside your tent fishing the same waters as everyone else. And not surprisingly you pull out some of the same fish. It would be very hard in the Arab Spring case to go into a planning session for a daily news programme with nothing in your head and produce something in a very short period of time that contributed anything to the public discourse. [...] My theory

about all of this is that there is no great conspiracy about this. Things just happen because of the kind of organizations we're dealing with. Downing Street is that kind of organization. Nobody's bad, nobody's evil, nobody's really lying. But the idea we all have in our minds is that somebody was good, somebody was bad. Campbell bad, Kelly good, Dr Brian Jones good, Tony Blair bad. Take the case of the recent Radio 4 play about the Iraq dossier. We always want to end with a hero and end with a villain. That goes back to what you're talking about – a piece of creativity that followed the tracks of what journalism laid down for it at the time.

CLP: Is this a doctrine of despair? From what you're saying it sounds as though we should all revert to the ideas of Baudelaire and just listen to music because at least it doesn't use words to express itself.

KM: Yes, it is [a doctrine of despair]. I sometimes feel that. Towards the end of my time editing programmes, which was 27 years all up, which was quite a long time, I got to the point where I thought that no view is any better than any other. Nothing that you can say about anything is inherently better than anything else. It really doesn't matter.

CLP: You're making it sound like Sisyphus and the rock.

KM: Yes, but at least Sisyphus didn't know that the rock was going to roll down each day.

CLP: From what you're saying, it's hard to imagine why even artists can find the energy to say that it matters.

KM: The example that's often used is Roth. You start with *Portnoy's Complaint*, it's full of life, it's rude, it's naughty and you get to the end and it's an old man staring into the grave. It's despairing. And I think everyone goes through that trajectory don't they?

CLP: Paul Auster certainly has. That sudden realization that if you don't write another novel, you don't care.

KM: If you're a novelist there must come a point when you think – buoyed up by the first book, buoyed up by the second, then the tour, then the reviews, the TV appearances, the people looking towards you as great - but there must come a point when you think 'why would anybody be interested in what I have to say about anything?' Unless you're fantastically conceited. Or just love the process of writing. Like John le Carré, who just enjoys the process. But if you actually care about 'what am I saying to the world', you must get to the point of thinking why would anyone give a shit what I say.

CLP: John le Carré is a good example of a novelist who was invited onto the radio to comment on whether a real life spy story of the day would make a good fictional spy story. The convoluted connection was made between real life and the novel and the novelist. His judgement was that the real life event wasn't any good as fiction, but it was such a perverse question to ask, wasn't it?

KM: I think the heart is in the right place, the intention is right, to try to give something new, but it's still very formulaic. It's still from the same box of stuff.

CLP: That's the general picture, but in the specific case of 9/11, there was something very particular in terms of its gravity, the scale, the size. Were you editing that day?

KM: I was eventually. But to start with I was driving back into London. I was just driving past Canary Wharf and I looked down and saw thousands of voice messages on my 'phone. And it was Jeremy [Skeet] who was editing PM that day and I listened through and Jeremy said, very laid back, 'It looks like there's been a bit of a plane crash. I don't know if you're picking these up. Then more messages. Both towers have been hit. And then another one about the Pentagon. It was getting more and more frantic so I ended up hurtling in and I ended up editing from about 3 or 4 onwards that day. But the scale, of it, the feel of it. I don't think it's possible to properly compute that even now. It was just so huge, so vast. And yes it was a completely different human experience either to anything before or after, completely... 9/11 was just huge. It's like a dream in the sense that so many things didn't seem to fit, they didn't seem real. God knows what it was like as a New Yorker.

CLP: Paul Auster was in New York that day and his daughter was travelling underneath the Twin Towers to school for the first time by herself. But the language he uses is so poor and thin and inadequate.

KM: He probably couldn't reach what he felt.

CLP: Yet he is someone who is so often asked to transact for the world afterwards, but on that day he couldn't produce a sentence that made any difference. Was there a sense in the office that you knew how to respond, and in the same way as each other?

KM: No, it was one of those rare things that almost broke the system. Because at one level you're thinking, well we need a few clips here and we need someone who's on the scene there – at that level you could deal with it. But I very definitely got the sense in that first hour between 4pm and 5pm, when we went live on Radio 4, we didn't know how to cope with it. And there wasn't a framework, wasn't a conceptual framework to fit this into. We even had doubts – is this as big as we're thinking it is? It was weird. The usual thing when we went into the ERM or the Queen Mother died, you had a conceptual framework. And that did very nearly break it... There was a real level of uncertainty. To some extent you mask that, because you're chucking things on air, so in a sense the mechanics of it masked it, but in terms of making sense of it all, or even making a narrative out of it, or a semi-narrative or finding bits of narrative. Thinking about that metaphor of the dream, you know when you have those very vivid dreams when lots of very realistic scenes happen and your dreaming mind can link them, but when you wake up and remember it you can't think for the life of you what it was. It was a bit like that. It's probably because of that feeling that as a journalist you should be able to make sense of it, you should be able to construct a narrative. And just physically there was an awful lot of head shaking. People were moving very slowly, it was a very strange afternoon. You would expect everyone to be rushing about, but everyone was going very

slowly. There was almost a feeling that 'if I walk too fast I might upset things': a very, very weird atmosphere. And trying to work towards the headlines at 5 and 6 o'clock when you do have to say something resounding it was almost impossible actually, almost impossible. At 6 the format kicked in 'there has been a terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York and on the Pentagon in Washington'. So there was a format for that, a framework for that. But then, what the fuck does that mean? It was almost as if anything you could say couldn't explain it. Because that doesn't explain it, does it?

CLP: So the long view, that the novelist has struggled to capture 9/11, to transact it, clearly pertained to you too as a journalist. You couldn't transact it in the short term either.

KM: Yes, and yet there was that feeling too that somehow as a journalist you *should* be able to make sense of it. Then conceptually it diverged because there was a very definite New York strand, an American strand and then a very definite other strand developed. Very quickly. There did come a point and this is going to sound very brutal, there did come a point when we were seeing yet more pictures of the messages and ribbons on church railings just by Ground Zero, there was a little bit of me saying 'for fuck's sake, just get over it will you?' So there was a bit of that. The thing peaked around Christmas because there was Hanukkah and Christmas. And then there was a clear divergence between the way New York was seeing it and how the rest of the world was seeing it. And I remember feeling slightly that it was a bit much. I can't watch another of these ad hoc, multi-faith ceremonies at Ground Zero.

CLP: Kamila Shamsie and Nadeem Aslam say that America regards it as one day. But that the rest of the world regards it as an event that is part of a grand continuum. And that in some ways we as journalists are responsible for that, we are culpable because we failed to explain history. What is the way of getting this right?

KM: Yes, there is that. I think there is a more holistic conceptualization that we have lost. I can't help feeling that if you go back to the nineteenth century there was much more of a continuum of daily journalism, through magazine journalism, through novels, there was much more a continuum through the whole of public discourse, whereas now we have a series of fractures. I think time is an important element in this. One of the lectures that I do I call 'Journalism's Fourth Dimension'. I illustrate how time has come out of the journalistic equation so that some of things we were talking about in the beginning, those initial framings, which used to take in William Russell's day three weeks to form, they're now formed instantly and they're even harder to undo. So the gap between daily journalism and the other part of public discourse, where once there was a continuum, there are just now a series of fractures. And then of course there is the other fracturing where you don't exactly have the right wing/left wing plays, but you certainly have a political polarization within each of the forms. And a high and low culture divide too. Long form journalism is dying and if you take a David Edgar play, or any kind of high culture, that is also challenging. Does it have a resonance? If it doesn't, then there really is that fracture between the various different forms. It matters because it comes back to your point that you then have this poverty of expression, poverty of concept that means do you really understand anything?



CLP: But you've already said that there's a poverty of concept in the common framings that journalists offer.

KM: Just because we're in a conspiracy with them, it doesn't mean that it's the right thing to do. Mark Thompson did four really interesting lectures just towards the end of this Director Generalship, which were quite thoughtful and weren't really reported for some reason. In one of them he talked about the decadent language of even the BBC, the limited language, the common framings, the way we exclude a lot of potential language and framings. He also said something very interesting, that there is almost a double whammy – not his phrase but mine – almost a double whammy going on that if you're an editor in the BBC and you decide that only the familiar concepts and stories will get on air, Syria is going to get on air because they're familiar with it for example. We tend to report the same economic statistics, we tend to report the same crimes, so first of all we have this incredibly limited types of stories that we do because we think they're the only ones the audience can cope with. So we don't go for complexity, we don't try to explain credit defaults and swop options, or whatever it was that lay behind the 2008 crash because that was too complicated, so we don't do that. And then in that very limited framework of stories, we then use language which is way over their heads. The consequence of that is an absolute failure to understand anything. So it's a double disservice to the audience. First of all you're impoverishing the things you're going to talk about at all and then Robert Peston or Nick Robinson are going to use the language of the stock exchange or the lobby, which you don't understand... How many people know the difference between RPI or CPI, because we broadcast that all the time. How many people know what a 150 point rise on the Stock Exchange means? [...] There is an essential contradiction between the novelist and news which is that in news you're supposed to think 'wow' about the event but then be quite comfortable with the format that you're told about it in. With the novelist you're supposed to be comfortable about nothing. It's supposed to be 'wow', amazing story but 'oh crikey why is he or she doing it this way?'

CLP: Do you see problems with the word 'narrative' itself? Because after all a narrative is about telling a story and putting things in place. Isn't it a misleading idea that narrative should even be sought, both in terms of news and the novel?

KM: We believe we want stories, but in the way we interact with each other now either in conversation or via social media, there's very little narrative involved. [...] Things are fractured. There are points of meeting but more points of difference between news and the novel and other art forms. It's like one of those Braque paintings where there is a lot of stuff and it sort of makes sense and you can see that it's in a single frame, but each individual part is disconnected and you don't know why things are there, they just are, in terms of understanding how things work in the world.

CLP: But 9/11 fiction is neurotic, reaching to define the impossible. It's not accidental, there's almost a neurotic overworking at play, because they don't know how to do it.

KM: That neurosis might reach back into the journalism, as a sort of neurotic mindset. That might be a link. That might be one of the places where they do connect.

CLP: Is there ultimately any point in transmuting the journalistic response to the event and turn it into something artistic? Is there any point in turning 9/11 into fiction?

KM: Yes, because there has to be a point in having a common understanding and hopefully, roughly speaking, the right understanding of the event, even with the different points of view. Otherwise we would all walk around believing and understanding not just marginally different things, but completely different things.

CLP: But because we were all equal witnesses that day, have we assimilated sufficient information for it not to be necessary to turn it into art?

KM: That might be another reason for the neurosis. We were all probably greater witnesses, more people witnessed it to a greater level, than any other event in history. Then we all took away from that our own understanding, so by a bizarre paradox, which is a paradox of modern communications, that having experienced broadly the same thing in broadly the same way with the same cameras, the way in which we then processed that and understood it, spoke about it to ourselves, fragmented in six billion different ways.

CLP: So is it then potentially, ideologically, the first 'perfect' news event in that we didn't need common framings, we didn't need mediation. Is there something to be sought for there, the solution to the problem that we keep talking about?

KM: I think that's a very good way of describing it. Journalism is headed that way. I use two clips in the lecture I was talking about, one from the start of the Gulf War in 1991 and then 2003. In 1991 when CNN was just getting a foothold, the night the bombing starts you have Peter Arnett and Bernard Shaw, a map of Iraq, pictures of the two guys on the telephone describing what's happening. They're bringing to it who they are, senior correspondents, telling what they don't know, don't understand. 'I can hear explosions', real eyewitness reporting, journalist bearing witness. Spool forward 12 years to 'Shock and Awe' and there were no reporters at all. What you had was a series of cameras scanning the Baghdad skyline, the booms, the bangs. What is good about that? Well you're witnessing it for yourselves, rather like 9/11. You're in the news story. You're watching it happen. The downside is that you've got no one bearing witness telling you what you can't see, no expertise telling you what *isn't* happening. There's no journalistic input. 9/11 as the first 'perfect' news event absolutely puts the finger on it. Because if now you look at the news priorities of the BBC, it's to get news cameras there to show you. It's not to get a reporter there anymore. The reporter comes second. And that is now the expectation, that like 9/11, we will watch the thing for ourselves and take away from it whatever we take away from it.

CLP: Is that risky, or is it worthwhile?

KM: It's inevitable. You've now got a generation of kids growing up and it's getting to the stage where anything that has ever been filmed is on YouTube. And the converse is it doesn't exist if it isn't there. So you have the expectation now, what's called the show-me tendency, which is 'I don't care what you thought when you saw that, I don't want you Mr. William Russell to go to the Crimea. I don't want you to bear witness. I want you to get a camera there and show me so that I can see it.' The upside is that we all share the same initial experience, but like with 9/11 we then have different processing interpretations, we bring ourselves to it, our backgrounds, and that explains the differentiation I was talking about between the New Yorkers who stayed mawkishly with it forever, whereas we all moved on and started to analyze it in terms of going back as far as anyone wanted to go. Back to the days of Raj if you really wanted to.

CLP: So is that finally the point, the value to the artistic endeavour, of moderating what has been seen and turning it into something else?

KM: Yes. Maybe that answers your initial question. Maybe that is the role. But then you ask the question, 'actually is that the role of the novelist or does it have to be something much more popular than that, popular culture, if it's to have any resonance'. If you have a perceptive novel or a play that is the absolute essence of this, it really does capture it... If two thousand people see it, does it count, does it matter? If two million people see it, it probably does.

## APPENDIX 4

### Transcript of interview with Kamila Shamsie, 28 May 2009

CLP: What key differences do you see between the American novel about 9/11 and the kind of novel that you have written?

KS: I don't believe I have written a 9/11 novel. I have written a War on Terror novel. American and English writers seem to be more interested in the 9/11 novel and what 9/11 meant, rather than how events came to that day. There's an interesting distinction starting to form, where the United States will write about the day itself and Pakistani writers are more interested in what came before and after. They're overlapping but not distinct categories.

CLP: Do you find the American novel limited in that sense?

KS: I would never take away from anyone the right to discuss an event of national importance, the events that speak to them most deeply. It was such a colossal moment, that I'm not going to take issue with those who want to write about it. It's so odd trying to be nationalistic about this migrant city of New York. But it seems odd that by 2009 we haven't seen an opening up of experience. Jeanette Turner Hospital's *Orpheus Lost* is set in the United States but it's also got this man from the Middle East. Hers is a War on Terror novel, not a 9/11 novel. But largely, the US is so used to seeing itself largely as a country different on September 12<sup>th</sup> 2001 and Americans were asking themselves 'why do they hate us?' The fact that they don't have an answer is a failure of fiction writers. Where was the novel putting the United States in the world? Growing up in Pakistan in the 1980s, I was much more aware of America's place in the world than the US itself was. When I went to an American university, there was a blindness to what the US was doing to nations such as mine.

CLP: You use the term 'War on Terror', but does it have limitations?

KS: The War on Terror was a terrible phase. It was wide ranging enough for them to place any nation within that context and therefore say 'we have the right to attack you because of 9/11.' 9/11 was used as *carte blanche* whenever and wherever we see enemies. The irony was that no nation state actually *did* it.

CLP: Do you welcome the fact that Obama is distancing himself from the term?

KS: I think Barack Obama, for all his missteps, I think he is doing interesting things at a rhetorical level. The War on Terror is a corrupt phrase. Now, if you take that phrase out, what do you put in its place? The other thing he's doing is stressing the need to remove the phrase 'the climate of fear'. It's important for him to say that we cannot use this as our basic emotion. I was in the United States two weeks ago and the more I'm there, the more I see how

important human rights and the rights of migrants are. Within the bounds of that nation, they do pretty well. But during the Bush years, with the existence of Guantanamo, it was eating into the national myth of inclusivity.

CLP: In your novel, there is some ambivalence about the role of the Third Country Nationals in the death of Harry. Would you dislike readers to assume that Steve is right that they are a threat?

KS: Is Steve correct? No, it's not one of Harry's guys who kills him. I think Harry's vision is damaged and he himself endangers his own vision. I don't think he would defend the US in migrant terms anymore, because he's not caring about Afghanistan. The Third Country Nationals who come to work in Afghanistan, they do not turn on the Americans. Steve's whole thing is that if they are Muslim they are inevitably on the other side.

CLP: Is it not then a risk to arrange for Harry to be shot?

KS: Anxieties about him being shot? Well, I certainly wouldn't want one of the Third Country Nationals to turn their guns on him. They are there because of economic necessity.

CLP: At the close of the novel, Raza is being held in Guantanamo. Has Obama's declared policy on the closure of Guantanamo changed things?

KS: The day Barack Obama announced that he would be closing Guantanamo, my father said to me 'well, that changes the end of your novel, doesn't it?' But the thing is that I didn't know that it would end that way. There was going to be a *deus ex machina* and it was all going to be OK. I wrote the end of the chapter when Kim and Hiroko get the phone call and I realized that it was the end. And it was a very disturbing moment for me. Really, what was Kim going to be able to do?

CLP: Did your father's comment almost bring a sense of relief?

KS: Relief? The possibility is that people are going to be released from Guantanamo. But one option is that Raza is going to stay there. The other option is that Kim doesn't stop fighting to get him out. She's not someone who can sit back. But how successful will she be? There were always flickers in my mind that he would get out. My response was to the real world, not to the fictional world. And my sense of relief was in terms of someone who has lived in America and who was in some ways responding as an outsider.

CLP: Do you share Mohsin Hamid's idea of the divided self – the novelist who is both drawn to and distanced from the US?

KS: Mohsin seems to feel more American than me, possibly. I've never felt remotely American, but it's a place that I feel comfortable in. I saw two Americas very clearly, but most people didn't want to see the America I saw. [...] Mohsin creates a tension between the filter of a narrator whom we're not sure we are able to trust. It's reversing the old colonial narrative. It used to be the colonial voice representing characters from the sub-continent. It's playful because the narrator is so unreliable. It's conscious of the fact that we're so

used to hearing and accepting just one voice. It's drawing attention to the limitations of listening to one voice.

CLP: What was your intention in allowing overlaps and connections to be drawn with Nagasaki?

KS: Hiroko is carrying Nagasaki on her back. It is both literal and metaphorical. Every time she touches her back, that's Nagasaki. The nothingness of feeling, that blinding white light, that light is an absence, it's an obliteration, without nerve endings. She carries it on her back. But she's not clawing at her scabs. It's an absent world now. That absent world happens later too, with Sajjad and Delhi. 'We both know what it is to live with absence.' Something has been removed. What does that do to memory? It's an absolute loss. Your memory reminds you of what was. It's memory that draws attention to that blankness. It's like a dynamited home, it's telling you how empty it is, because you remember the house. It's an absent present. Just as it is for Abdullah and Afghanistan.

Our lives are not a-historical. Hiroko and Sajjad are able to make new lives, and that's admirable. But part of that creation of new lives involves refusing to let Raza know about the past. Therefore he doesn't have a history. Neither does Kim because Harry is keeping his life secret too. It's a double-edged thing. If my characters are to survive, they have to be forward looking. But there still needs to be a sense of bearing witness, of not ignoring the past.

CLP: Does that come back to your dismay at America's lack of understanding about its past, about its global history?

KS: Both Pakistan and the US are notoriously bad at talking about history. We have never admitted our terrible role in Afghanistan. This is not a book that's about what the US is supposed to have done wrong. Japan in the 1940s is more xenophobic than the US was in 2001. Nations need to engage with their history and the strange decisions they make. There's a connection between countries failing and Hiroko and Sajjad failing. They had knowledge about the deep violence. If she had told Raza different stories, if she had made him see the deep danger around her, he would have been a different boy. There's a connection between nations not coping with their past. They don't stop to ask 'What price self-defence?'

CLP: You make connections with Kipling and Forster in the novel, but they're oblique. What do you want to be drawn from those subtle connections?

KS: you're right about the connections to Kipling's *Kim* and *A Passage to India*. But it isn't explicit. I don't need to offer guidance to the reader. When I was writing about James and Sajjad, *A Passage to India* was just lurking there and I decided to make use of it. With *Kim*, I was quite genuinely thinking that Kim would do as the name for quite a while before Kipling came into my mind. Then it made it perfect. For me it said more about Harry that Kim would be the name of all names. It's very loaded that Harry chooses it and since that name is there, I knew that Kim would become involved. You read this Kim against the other Kim. Ilse and Hiroko are pretty smart women and they adore Kim, which says something. But Kim is a lost soul. With the death of her

father, she no longer has a way of dealing with the world anymore. Kim is so tossed around by what is happening. As soon as Ilse is dead there's nothing left.

CLP: Was your intention to limit the sense of any redemptive force?

KS: Where there is redemption is in the idea that the bonds of family are strong enough. And Kim does admit what she has done. It's a book in which individual characters are willing to do things for each other and for other nations. Politically, Raza and Kim by the rules of their family life should have met in Hiroko's drawing room or on Harry's balcony. But awful political circumstances sweep that opportunity away. Harry really likes being the revered US uncle who makes things happen. He's enjoying his power. It's so different to what he gets from his daughter – there's this boy who loves everything he does. There's such a thing as the right thing for the right reason and Raza, for all that he ends up in Guantanamo, he's finally done the right thing. For Abdullah. He owes Abdullah a great deal. Just as Kim needed to make a large gesture because the sin was so large, it's the first thing that he does that allows him to feel good about his life. I'm conscious of myself being interested in these matters and fiction is the place where I explore the ideas. I don't want to make claims for literary fiction because by its nature it reaches a small audience. I don't write because it changes things, but because it bears witness.

CLP: What strengths and merits do you see for literary fiction, by comparison with news journalism?

KS: News journalism by its very nature can only report what happened yesterday. How can it reflect fifty years? It does a very different thing. Look at *The Wasted Vigil* for example. It says 'here are the layers, the complexities and the inter-twinings', so that it's no longer possible to say that 9/11 is when it started. Let's see if 1979 and the presence of the Soviets in Afghanistan is when it started. Fiction creates stories which add nuance. News journalism fulfils one function and novels, which are powered by circumstances and empathy, do something else. Novels allow you to imagine yourself on *other* sides of history. You can understand both a Harry Burton and a Hiroko. There are multiple truths. The point about being a fiction writer is that we are making up stuff all the time but it's not the truth. The real problem comes with the idea of the singular truth anyway. There are multiple, multiple, multiple truths. But now we have a situation where different truths are colliding with each other. I shy away from the notion that writers *must* do something. Your first fidelity is to the novel itself. The novel is a piece of art and a novelist must do those novelistic things. I find that I have a problem with the words 'role' and 'function' but a novel *can* do things. It has a great freedom to roam.

## APPENDIX 5

### Transcript of interview with Amy Waldman, 30 January 2012

CLP: What power does fiction have to both bear witness to traumatic events and to memorialize them? Is there a sense in which fiction has a more powerful, perhaps even more reliable, role to play than journalism does?

AW: When it comes to the facts, fiction is less reliable, and should be. But when it comes to what facts mean, or suggest, or elide, when it comes to what goes unspoken when facts are recorded, or to the emotional tenor of a piece of history - yes, I would argue that fiction is more reliable.

CLP: The most morally corrupt and reprehensible character in the novel is a reporter. She craves what you describe as the 'crack cocaine of her business', i.e. the role of columnist, the 'shaper' of the news. And yet, in the bizarre moral universe of the reporter, she is horrified by Oscar's suggestion that she should change the rules of engagement and 'make something up'. What sense are we to make of a profession that disapproves of total invention, but is happily engaged in embroidering, embellishing, distorting and manipulating what few facts there are.

AW: I would caution against viewing Alyssa as a stand-in for an entire profession, rather than as the individual character she is. She doesn't stand for 'journalism' any more than Mo, or Asma for that matter, stand for Islam. I wasn't interested in indicting all of journalism. I was interested in showing how the media itself is an actor in history, not just a recorder of it. I think reporters are inventing rules all the time - they have to. To report is itself a distortion, since you are choosing what to include, and exclude - any neat narrative is false, by definition, because it tries to make sense of a reality that often doesn't make sense itself. (Subjects of stories, incidentally, also embroider and embellish and exclude, making them complicit in whatever narrative gets constructed.) I also think reporters are engaged in a constant process of rationalizing about how they get subjects or sources to open up, what they promise about how information will be used versus how it is used in practice, and so on.

CLP: You write that Alyssa 'had no ideology, believed only in information...' But you demonstrate skillfully many times in the novel that information is unreliable. Is there such a thing as the absolute truth in journalism or anywhere else for that matter?

AW: Absolute truth, no; facts, yes. I don't subscribe to the notion that everyone's view of reality or history has equal validity. For all her moral reprehensibility, Alyssa has a democratic aspect to her - she's battling the 'gatekeepers' deciding what is important, or newsworthy, or proper for public consumption. In this aspect she is kind of an allegorical character - standing in, on some level, for blogs etc that have challenged elite power brokers - whether newspaper editors or those who have access to them - who historically have exercised control over the news.



CLP: Journalists aren't the only characters who have casual relations with the truth. One committee member states that 'The record of our proceedings is a fungible thing', while another member, in a nod to Karl Rove's notorious statement about reality, says that 'History makes its own truths'. In the end is History the only true arbiter of what actually happened?

AW: The problem is that history doesn't exist outside of our record of it; or rather, the record made of history is the only way we can access it. To me one of the values of fiction is that it can hint at, or force us to imagine, the history that exists outside the official record, to make us see how partial and occluded our sense of any history is.

CLP: Oscar and Alyssa speak a 'callous patois peculiar to reporters'. It's one that all journalists are familiar with. But is that patois morally culpable or simply a pragmatic way of dealing with day-to-day news – grading it, classing, prioritizing it.

AW: I would argue that that patois is a way of emotionally dealing with the news, as well. My own experience in reporting on death, tragedy, etc. was that you have to shut down a part of yourself - you can't allow yourself to feel everything or you can't operate. Over time that hardening can become a permanent state - and the 'callous patois' many reporters speak in is a reflection of that

CLP: You trace the wild trajectory from the *Times*' architecture critic's suggestion that Mo's design is an Islamic garden, to Fox News' extrapolation that it's a 'martyrs' paradise', to the Post's 'victory garden' to Lou Sarge's wild conclusion that it's 'a garden with bugs'. Do you think your readers will be shocked by the realities of news reporting, or simply resigned to them?

AW: I don't know.

CLP: How optimistic are you about the future of journalism?

AW: I'm going to pass on this one.

CLP: Since 9/11, a new journalistic genre has emerged. It's one you describe as 'Relatives' Ruminations', and which is closely related to the *New York Times*' 'Portraits of Grief' series. I was intrigued to see last month that following a motorway crash, the *Guardian* in London asked Twitter for information about those who had died, saying that the tributes would be 'storified.' Is 'storification' or 'Relatives' Ruminations' a new form of sanitized and unreliable narrative that will take journalism even further away from the truth?

AW: To me these are two different things. 'Relatives' Ruminations' involves a reporter calling someone for a quote, and deciding how to tell the story. In the second thing you describe, the relatives get to tell their own story, and it's entirely possible that could produce something closer to, rather than further from, the truth. But you are right that almost all storytelling about the dead is sanitized. That's going to be true whether a reporter (bound by convention, or

propriety, or fear of offending) or a relative tells the story. That's where fiction can come in - give you a glimpse of the often-dirtier truth.

CLP: So much of your novel is about the way in which we memorialize the dead. Is *The Submission* a memorial in itself?

AW: I didn't conceive it that way when I was working on it. I'm interested in the process of memorialization - and what it reveals, or irrupts - as much as memorials themselves, and the novel fits with that. If it's a memorial, it's not just memorializing the dead - it's also memorializing what was changed in America by the way they died. I think the two go hand in hand - grieving for people, grieving for other things that were lost or sacrificed as a result of their death - and the novel is an attempt, perhaps, to conjoin them in a way an actual memorial can't.

CLP: Claire opens the novel asking 'The names.. What about the names?' and closes the work, saying 'The names.. Where are they?' It was moving to watch relatives of those who died taking rubbings from the raised names of their loved ones on the 10th anniversary of the attacks, just as they still do at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. What particular resonance does a name have for you?

AW: Names, in some ways, are the key to everything in this novel - not just the names of the dead, which is ultimately how they are remembered, but also the names of the living - specifically that of Mohammad Khan, whose name is the real problem. It was a huge shift in memorializing to start listing all of the dead (i.e. ordinary people) and has now become central to any memorial project: the name is the way we sanctify the individual, allow him or her to stand apart from collective death. It's how we say that each life matters. Which is why Claire considers the absence of her husband's name, and Asma the potential absence of her husband's, so wounding - it's an erasure. I sometimes wonder whether with time digital technology will change the nature of memorializing, so that where we now have walls with names you instead will have a panel, and when you press a name that person's life or character will somehow unfold before you. But until then, names are all we have, the simplest record that we lived.

CLP: I'm interested in your choice of names for your characters. Alyssa means truth but Spier is an archaic form of 'spy'. The threat implicit in the name Mohammad is dissipated by its truncation to Mo. Fred holds his job within his name - Ed. Your talk show host is called Sarge, a name that evokes thoughts of Sarge Serge in Paul Auster's 9/11 novel *Man in the Dark*, which itself raises thoughts of *Catch 22*'s Major Major. How deliberate were you in your choice of names?

AW: I was deliberate with most, including Spier and also Mohammad - not just the truncation, but Mohammad being both the most provocative name to some non-Muslims even as it's the most popular Muslim name. I didn't know about the Auster novel or character - but Sarge (which may or may not be his real name anyway) just seemed to fit the character. With Claire, I kept coming back to claire-obscure - the French translation of chiaroscuro - the way she is, in essence, trying to create herself, using both light and dark to do so.

CLP: Maya Lin's memorial, which you refer to several times, is mimicked in the novel by the bid known as the *Void*. Lin's memorial is a gash in the ground, while the *Void* is a gash in the sky. How much did you draw from Maya Lin's experience in the writing of your novel and what is your view of her memorial.

AW: I think Lin's memorial is brilliant. Partly I was trying to capture how she and that particular memorial have come to shadow, or maybe overshadow, all subsequent memorials - everyone is trying to capture the same mix of minimalism and meaning (and I'm always astounded by how every time I see an image of her memorial or read something about it I discover a new level of meaning). And it's elusive - no one has matched her.

CLP: How much did you take from the furore that erupted concerning the building of a mosque near Ground Zero?

AW: I took both confirmation of my instincts in conceiving the novel in the first place, but also a more acute sense of how the mechanics of something like this would actually play out - the spectre of violence, for example; the unexpected chain reactions.

CLP: Maya Lin explicitly said that her work 'is not a monument to the individual'. In that sense human dimension and scale are stripped from her memorial. Your character Ariana says that '... a memorial isn't a graveyard. It's a national symbol, an historic signifier...' Do we expect too much from our memorials and invest them with too much power?

AW: I don't know if the problem is expecting too much or not knowing what we expect. I believe we've become afflicted, a little, by a memorial-industrial complex, in which we pour enormous amounts of money and efforts into memorial while often ignoring the questions that hover around their edges. I think the real 9/11 memorial, which I saw only a few months ago, is very powerful in its design, and yet it also seems, in scale, somehow disproportionate - suggesting, somehow, that we can't move on from that moment, when in fact of course we already have. It's hard to separate, now, what happened on September 11 with everything that happened as a result in the decade after - in my mind, at least, they've woven together as a single piece of history. But the memorial treats that day in isolation; it has to. I'm interested in the ads all over New York connected to the memorial - they urge people to "Honour, Remember, Reunite." Honour and remember, yes, but reunite around what, exactly? It's a fairly loaded question.

CLP: How conscious were you of the role of the garden as a bringer of order from chaos, a role it's played in fiction since the eighteenth century. Is such order merely an aspiration, or can a work of art have a salving power, whether it's a garden, a novel, a sculpture or a piece of music.

AW: I was very interested in the way gardens came to represent both philosophical and practical order. I think there are parallels to the novel, which can salve by ordering reality - except that the novel should also, on some level, introduce chaos to order. It should make you question the reality before you, should unsettle you on some level.

CLP: Paul is acting from a desire for self-advancement, Ariana is attempting to advance a protégé, Claire and others are simply dreading the end of the fight. Governor Bitman has '... found an issue that could catapult her to national prominence.' Issam Malik is acting from personal ambition. Asma Anwar is possibly the only character not acting out of self-interest. Is she the novel's only heroic figure?

AW: It depends how you define heroic. I wouldn't say self-interest is entirely absent from Asma's actions - she has a conception of herself she's trying to both create and live up to; she imagines herself playing the heroine in multiple scenarios, and acts on Mo's behalf partly because of the desire to be that person. Speaking out on his behalf doesn't happen in isolation. But, in taking a clear stance among so many wafflers, she's probably the most heroic.

CLP: Abdul, the son of Asma, ends the novel saying of Bangladesh and America that 'I sometimes feel each place is the wrong place.' This is precisely what Mohsin Hamid's protagonist feels in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and indeed it's a feeling that the novelist himself says he suffers from. What overlaps do you see between Hamid's character and an increasingly vilified and isolated Mo in your novel?

AW: Some, yet for me the essence of Mo - his character and his plight - is that he is an American, which Hamid's character was not. It is his own country - his own identity - he has become estranged from. Hamid's character begins as a foreigner in America; Mo, on some level, is made one.

CLP: There's a sense in your novel in which humility and a refusal to attempt to shape events are the only morally acceptable courses of action. The man with whom Mo prays in the garden 'had forgotten himself, and this was the truest submission'. If Mo 'had forgotten himself' could the garden have been built?

AW: That's a tough question for me to answer because he couldn't forget himself - it's not his nature. And also, what would forgetting himself mean? What, to me, was interesting in how he evolved is that his ego, in part, leads him to a political stance, and the two become inseparable.

## APPENDIX 6

### Transcript of interview with Rowan Williams, 3 April 2013

RW: When you think of the visual images of 9/11, they are very, very hard to capture or to rework because they're so enormous and the actual sight of the plane going into the tower and bodies falling from the windows and dust clouds in the street... who has managed that? I find it very difficult to read any of the novels. It's a difficult question because it's just that the visual images do still bring back a moment I haven't really got words for, and having been close-ish to it, I think there's almost a resentment about people who're not so close to it finding words on my behalf. And when I think of my own experience of that day, which is immeasurably less traumatic than that of some people in the vicinity... those in the buildings and when I think of the children who were with us that day – I ask myself what they are making of it now, twelve years later?

CLP: Was it clear immediately, before you knew precisely what had happened, that something unimaginable, something hugely dangerous and disruptive had happened?

RW: When the first plane came into the tower none of us knew what was going on. We couldn't see where we were – there was the suck of air drawing thousands of bits of paper out of the windows, so that it was like a snowstorm, looking out. Suddenly the sky was filled with scraps of paper. None of us really had much idea at that point and then when fifteen, twenty minutes later the second plane hit, then we knew this was something of unimaginable scope. We had no idea what was ahead.

CLP: You must have felt under huge threat.

RW: I think we were rather assuming that we would be fortunate to live through this.

CLP: Was language hard to find at that moment?

RW: We prayed a bit together, being mostly clergy. There wasn't a lot to say. I do remember somebody saying as we bundled ourselves down the stairs towards the basement, 'Well, if we've got to die, this is quite a good group of people to be in company with'. That was a very serious moment, when everybody nodded and said 'yes, if we had to choose these people, we were quite content to die'.

CLP: You said very honestly that there were times that you felt resentment that people could dare describe what happened that day, because they would be finding words on your behalf. So what must be done with an experience such as yours? Must it be held close to you, kept to those who actually experienced it?

RW: No, no. I just report a reaction that anyone involved in serious trauma must feel, even somebody let's say who has been recently bereaved, picking up a

book on bereavement and saying 'How dare they? What has this book to do with me? This is my territory.' Holocaust literature is another monumentally significant area and I would guess that you would have some interest in exploring that too in a comparative way. But theory doesn't do the job in the end. With any traumatic experience, at some point you have to make it part of your own story and part of your own narrative. You've got to talk about it. I don't mean in a cheap, therapeutic, let-it-all-out way, I suppose that's why I wrote what I did in the months following, possibly too quickly. There were things that I just needed to say, put out there, and engage with. And as soon as you've done that you're admitting that it can be talked about, and if it can be talked about then other people will talk about it too. There's a series of lectures I'm working on at the moment, about how as soon as we state who we are or what has happened to us, we are setting something out which invites recognition. We're saying to somebody else – 'you must know what I mean'.

CLP: So at that point it is a tentative invitation for others to share that experience. But does it feel a risky thing to do?

RW: Yes, that's right. And it is quite risky. Because if you hold something to yourself, you know that it's safe and you're safe. It's locked up. But you also need it to be recognized, and you need acknowledgement. And if you go out looking for acknowledgement then you take a risk that something will be misrecognized, the risk that you yourself misrecognize what you've been talking about, that you've betrayed something. But that's the process you go through. I once met Elie Wiesel but I didn't quite have the nerve to ask him, 'How do you do it?' How do you write about this without somehow thinking that you've shrunk it?

CLP: The book that you wrote, very swiftly afterwards, is very small, measured, reflective. You consistently say in the text that you're attempting to go slow, to be thoughtful – you write early on as a kind of instruction to yourself: 'Careful. You can do this too quickly.' But you also maintain that the words are mutable, that in the future the words for it may be different. Eleven years after it was published, have the words changed in any way?

RW: I haven't re-read them recently. It was something which a friend in publishing asked me very urgently to do and I realized that yes, I wanted to do it. I think that what interests me looking back is that what I wrote was between two poles – the geopolitical and the very, very local and personal. And in between those two poles are the two towers. Between the two poles, are what was going on that day, which I can't imagine and don't feel I can try to – those people who suffered and died that day. And looking at it now I can see that that is the gap in what I wrote. But maybe that's a necessary gap. I don't know how one could write about that. How could one write about that?

CLP: That implies in some ways that your language hasn't changed, that your words haven't evolved. That there's still a gap and things that can't be said.

RW: I'm always wary of what you might call trauma pornography. You read it because of the sense of being in touch with an extreme experience. It does get the adrenalin flowing in some ways. I'm very wary of that. Even your own text can work that way sometimes. I don't want to get excited by it. Let's be very

blunt about this. If something like that happens in the world that we're in, it makes you interesting. 'Ooh you were *there*?' And I have to be very aware of that and I have to be very suspicious of it.

CLP: Is that how it has been? That people have been drawn to you because of your experience that day? That you are 'interesting' because of it?

RW: Yes, a bit. And there have been times when I have very deliberately backed off saying anything about it because I don't want to say 'Hey, look at me. I'm interesting, I was *there*.'

CLP: You have in fact been remarkably reticent about it. Very few people even seem to know you were there.

RW: Once I said what I had to say in the little book, I haven't wanted to go around talking about it. I did one very brief radio piece for the BBC on the tenth anniversary and that has been it.

CLP: You mention in your book that the day after the attacks you were 'phoned by a Welsh broadcaster. They began speaking to you in Welsh, but you say that you were very resistant to the idea of responding in Welsh in case the words you chose weren't the right ones. What precisely did you mean by that?

RW: It's funny how relatively small things crystallize something. My Welsh is so-so. I can get by. But I knew that if the conversation began in Welsh then I would have to carry on in Welsh and I would be searching for things to say. Which might be a good thing in many ways, but also it would mean feeling that you were talking through a cloth. And it struck me as a metaphor. The language you're addressed in is the language that you speak.

CLP: And is it also a metaphor for trying to define the experience precisely as it was, rather than responding with a smaller, paler version of how it was?

RW: Yes, there was something of that too.

CLP: Is there then a flaw in the argument that says that a novel is capable of addressing 9/11? Because it can't be precise, it can't be factual. It's imagined and therefore in some ways it's always 'talking through a cloth?'

RW: Well that's a very interesting question. Is there anything that's not novelizable in human experience? And I would be rather loath to preempt an answer to that and say 'you can't go there' and 'you can't go there'. It's sometimes only by trying and failing that you see what it is that you're talking about. Another little bit of work I've been doing recently has been on fictional representations of Jesus. Some people would say that historically out of the moment that you really shouldn't try to write novels about Jesus. Some Christians would certainly say that. And I think at the end of the day that's maybe where you finally get to. But you have to try and fail.

CLP: What then is the advantage of writing a novel about Jesus or about 9/11, rather than a quasi-factual account - as best as one can surmise? From what you're saying there must potentially be an advantage?

RW: Yes, the advantage, I think, is that the novelist, the fictionalist makes or picks up connections with other sorts of experiences or contexts that aren't just there on the surface. A good novel makes connections. It says I will show you a pattern. Not a problem-solving pattern exactly, but a pattern that will deepen or enlarge your understanding of what is happening here, here and here. A good fiction is one that by creating voices in a certain kind of dialogue and holding that dialogue in a structure for you – and by dialogue I mean the dialogue interaction, not just what people say – it holds up a mirror to you so that you can say 'Ah, so what I say has rather more resonances than I thought. My relationships have more echoes and analogues than I thought'. As I sometimes put it, when you've finished a good novel you think there is more to us human beings than I realized. And more to me than I realized, because there's a bit more of you that's been created in the encounter with the novel. But with the massive, world-altering, boundary-challenging experiences, whether it be the life and death of Jesus or the Holocaust or a modern trauma like 9/11, it's almost like saying 'well how much bigger, how much deeper do you want things to be?' The event itself almost does the work of the great novel for you, because it pushes the boundaries. It deepens things. It creates places in you that weren't there before. So isn't the novel just going to domesticate that a bit? That's just a question. I don't have an answer to it. It's the territory in which novels about difficult stuff operate. Take a novel, which is really one of my great favourites, Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot*, a stunningly great novel. Which manages to not only get in a lot about mysticism, the aboriginal and colonial experience, the Holocaust – you name it and it's in that book – and I don't feel that that trivializes because it keeps a very, very skillfully maintained distance from some of the worst. Although there is a moment in the camps which is I think about the most brutal as anything White ever wrote. The sight of a Jewish woman naked without her wig trying to push her way out of the crowd going to the chambers. That does haunt you. But somehow I don't think it domesticates anything or trivializes. Because it leaves such a lot unresolved. And it also sets the story against a massive, metaphysical background.

CLP: What do you mean by domesticating exactly? The use of the small fragmentary detail, say of a child's discarded shoe, or the drive to reduce things to the point at which they are containable, understandable, safe?

RW: By domesticating I mean making it a story among others. I think when some Jewish people in particular say you can't write poetry or novels after or about the Holocaust, they're saying that this is not one item among others – there's something apocalyptic here which denies you the ordinary linguistic courtesies. Now the fact is of course that people have written novels about the camps, people have written poetry, such as Paul Celan. And what do you make of this poetry? It is at least a challenge to those who say you can't write poetry about the *Shoah*. I once supervised a thesis years ago on Holocaust fiction and one interesting point made by my very gifted student was that if you look at some Jewish writing, like that of Isaac Bashevis Singer, you have fictions about life in the *shtetl* before, and fictions about New York Jewry after, and in the middle you have this great silence which people will not really refer to and that in itself is a very powerful fictionalizer.

CLP: The fictionalizer is the great empty space in between?



RW: Yes, the empty space.

CLP: Related to the idea of the empty space in between, is the small space, the small-scale space chosen in fiction to express 9/11. DeLillo for example is a man of whom we expect a version of prophesy. He is our twenty-first-century seer in some ways. But he usually chooses a large, sprawling space, a form large enough to encompass all that he is dealing with. But *Falling Man* is slender, it is small. It is not domesticating but it is domestic. In some ways it's a novel about how one family deals with 9/11. Could that possibly be a way to confront it do you think?

RW: Yes, it's a way. That's exactly right I think. You have to have what I call a Zen-like attitude to it and the awful thing is that these great traumatic events generate sprawling, indulgent melodramatic responses. We all like melodrama. Somebody said that in the nineteenth-century Victorians thought *Othello* was Shakespeare's greatest tragedy because it's a melodrama. What they liked was that it is a Tragic Love Story, capital T, capital L capital S. Whereas King Lear terrified the Victorians. They ran from it.

CLP: Eric Santner has talked about 'narrative fetishism', that false idea that you can somehow set the world to rights via fiction. And obviously 9/11 has been a means by which certain kinds of novelists have attempted to do that. The idea that, yes, it's been traumatic but that it can all be made ok again. I don't know if you know the work of Karen Kingsbury, but she underpins the 9/11 novel essentially with a Christian ethic that says not only is it ok, it's proof that God is on our side. It becomes a kind of proselytizing text.

RW: That's really horrible, *really* horrible actually. Novels ought never to be propaganda. They do have their philosophies. They just do. There are very few innocent novels in that sense. But again the good novel is not one that leaves you with more conclusions, but with more room in your mind. So, to take an example like Dostoyevsky that I've written about, he wrote his novels out of a very passionate Christian orthodox conviction, but what makes them great novels is that his conviction doesn't get in the way. You don't have to agree with Dostoyevsky to feel that there's more of you when you've read it. He says 'This is who I am telling you this story, and I want you to look at that person and that person and that person because those are the ones that I think have the key.' But also, 'Hey, this is a novel. Look at who you like.'

CLP: Do you ultimately have the sense that with twenty-first-century traumas such as 9/11 maybe neatening up, resolutions, conclusions are all impossible.

RW: What would a resolution look like? With my own preferences and convictions I might be tempted to do and say 'well it's a story of nemesis of American pride, the revenge of the repressed globally'. And then you step back and say, 'Come on, that's just another moralizing story.' You can tell a story that's all about the sheer wickedness of those opposed to freedom as a way of life, the standard American Right rhetoric. And that's another betrayal. And you can try to tell a story that's much more risky, much more ambitious – how is it that people come to the point of perpetrating apocalyptic violence so that the novelistic puzzle is both the scale of the event but also what causes there are in

human nature to make such hard hearts. And to me one of the most interesting subjects that a novelist might address is how do you get to the point of being a hijacker. What is the world that makes that look all right to you. And to tell that story is not to offer any explanation but it is one way in which to say I want to create more space for the reader.

CLP: So what then do you make of Updike's *Terrorist* which in my view doesn't succeed on any of the levels you describe. Is there a possibility that he simply felt queasy about daring to succeed?

RW: What a very interesting question. Maybe. But I suppose if I'm honest I suspect it may just be that he's a tired writer. I do quite admire Updike, although he's not one of my favourites. But I think he's out of his comfort zone here.

CLP: Do you think then that perhaps the American novel simply can't do it?

RW: The American novelistic tradition which is capable of producing *Moby Dick* ought to be able to manage a large scale. There is a tradition of American fiction that is immensely politically sophisticated, like Trilling and Bellow too.

CLP: Have you read Paul Auster? He is on a different trajectory with 9/11. He takes a parallel line but he does not get too close. He imagines horrors, but not precisely those ones. It's a roundabout way of doing it.

RW: It doesn't sound wholly dissimilar to what Ian McEwan is doing in *Saturday*. It's a valiant effort I think and while the conclusion loses it and is sentimental it begins very well.

CLP: Have you read Richard Ford's *The Lay of the Land*? He took such a wide arc around it that it's almost unrecognizable, but he couldn't bear to get any closer.

RW: I like Richard Ford's writing and that is interesting because I think it takes us back to the sense of *pudeur*, the idea that I don't want to touch this because anything I say about it is going to shrink it somehow.

CLP: To go back to your own work, *Writing in the Dust*, and your choice at that time to give it a title that reinforced the idea that what you were saying were simply words in the dust and wouldn't/couldn't stay the same over time. What would you call it now? Are your words still there in the dust or have they evolved, become transient. Are they now simply a former layer in the palimpsest?

RW: I think the title was right, because that remains for me the strongest tactile memory of the day – the sheer quantity of the dust. The dust storm effect on the streets. I suppose the not very much wanting to revisit it reflects what I thought I was doing and not doing then, which was not to write a treatise about it or an explanation but to write something which just in those few months following might be a peg on which to hang an emotion or two. [...] There's a woman called Courtney Cowart who was with me that day who is a good friend still. And she wrote a book which is partly about her own experience of that day and of the follow through that I wasn't aware of. She was one of those who ran the 24-

hour support network that operated out of St Paul's church. The extraordinary irony is that after a couple of years of doing it, she felt that in order to get a break she would go to a job with the Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana, just before the hurricane. I went to New Orleans in 2007 and caught up again with Courtney and visited again the work she was doing. She really is a remarkable person and someone who I am deeply grateful to know. But she writes in real depth about it.

CLP: This is a difficult question, but do you feel still wounded by your experience of 9/11? I have the strong sense that you do.

RW: The word I would use is scarred rather than wounded. I know that when my memory goes back to that day, it flinches and there's still a near impossibility to get close to what was going on. But I was very protected. I didn't see the worst. But I suppose just that sense of being nearer death than I have ever been and the sheer intensity of it all. And that's there. It's just there. And I know that. And I know also what I feel when I see images on television – planes going.... – I can't, I just can't. It's a trigger for me...

CLP: What was the effect on you of the journalism at the time, the showing, the endless re-showing, the gasping rhetoric, the film metaphors.

RW: That's what we reach for. It's the domestication stuff again, isn't it? Put that onto a slightly different level, something that has always moved me greatly. It's one of the stories of [Anna] Akhmatova queuing up with a lot of women outside a prison in Moscow, waiting to see a member of her family in prison and they're standing outside in the snow in Stalinist Moscow in sub zero temperatures and all the rest of it. Another woman in the crowd recognizes who Akhmatova is and says 'Can you describe this?' and Akhmatova says 'Yes, I can.' It needs to be marked. There needs to be something. And Akhmatova and others *did* describe it. And how do you do that in a way which humanizes without domesticating? This is a very important point which some people have made about Holocaust literature. My dear friend Gillian Rose, the philosopher, who died 15 years ago, was Jewish but became Christian at the end of her life. She always said treating the Holocaust as though it's unspeakable is a real betrayal. If human beings can do this, human beings have to talk about it. Or human beings will do it again. Humanizing without domesticating. So the attempt to understand what is going on – you won't capture it, you won't rationalize it, you won't smooth it over, but you can at least push the discourse on, and that's the challenge I think.

CLP: So it's crucial not just that it could be done, but that it must be done?

RW: Yes, it must be. It's difficult for me to talk about the Jewish experience here, but someone like Gillian was able to, and she wrote some extraordinarily tough stuff, almost Holocaust pornography. Either you burrow into the detail or you back away making apocalyptic noises. What you have to do is to try to construct a humanizing narrative. And it's hard. And so with 9/11, you don't just back off and make grandiose sounds about it. You certainly don't use it as a lever to make an ideological point. [...] I'm writing at the moment about Jesus in fiction and there are comparisons between that and what we're talking about today – 9/11. This is an event that manifestly changes the possibilities of the

entirety of human history and how on earth do you start writing about that? And if Jesus is what Christians believe him to be, then how on earth do you get inside the psychology of someone like that? So you get really, really terrible edifying fictions – such as ‘when Jesus came down from the mountain he was looking very thoughtful’, which is awful, and you get those fictions where you’re always looking through someone else’s eyes, round a corner, looking at Jesus, which is much more effective. And you get those fictions which may not explicitly be about Jesus and they’re not just about Christ figures either, but as in Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot*, you have a figure onto whom everyone is projecting Christ-like expectations but who is in fact crushed by those expectations.

CLP: A slightly different point then is that, while you may be inching towards the notion that it may be necessary to write fictionally about 9/11, do you think it’s humanly possible?

RW: This is where I find, back to Gillian Rose again, the notion of exemplary failures very helpful. There are some failures that are better than others because some failures show you what the scale of it is,

CLP: Are you aware of any exemplary failures?

RW: I don’t think I’m well enough read.

CLP: Or perhaps you don’t want to read them?

RW: Probably not. But if I were exploring that area I think what I might look for is the exemplary failure – the novel that somehow registers the scale of the disturbance, like something on a pressure graph, so that there is enough of a jolt. In our lifetimes this has probably been one of the major imaginative disruptions. And whether or not it’s on the same level as the *Shoah* – well, on one level it’s obviously not. It’s not about six million people being butchered and killed in cold blood. But it is for our generation probably the biggest jolt. And I’m aware that in talking about our generation I’m talking about a Western, largely North Atlantic generation, and as several people myself included have said from time to time, just bear in mind the scale of human suffering and degradation, which some people in other parts of the world live with habitually, such as the Congo and Sudan.

CLP: Do you think that there is an element of newness to the experience of 9/11 that while it takes away Bloom’s idea of the ‘anxiety of influence’, with writers looking over their shoulders at what has gone before, it does however bring additional burdens in that everyone has seen it. Any fictional account is not bringing news to the people. What does that do to the fictional response?

RW: What makes that interesting is that it is quite designedly as far as one can tell, an atrocity for the mass communication age. It was meant to be vulgarized, it was meant to be an event on television screens all around the world. It was a Show, which is one of the terrifying things about it. And it does have that effect then of potentially paralyzing the describer who says ‘Am I then just colluding in another round of the Show Business side of 9/11?’ The horror of the *Shoah* is something that you peel away the coverings from bit by bit and you think you’ve got to the worst, and then there’s more – that sense of horrified discovery that

begins with the troops going into Belsen and slowly enlarges as Auschwitz, Dachau and Birkenau come in. Whereas this is shameless. And I suspect that this is another challenge for the novelist.

CLP: Is the net result of that shamelessness, that rather than peeling away and peeling away, that the novelist feels that in order to represent 9/11 it has to be covered up and covered up?

RW: Yes, I think that's very shrewd. Faced with the blatant the novelist may well say that what I have to do is to be oblique. Faced with the oblique the novelist may well have the duty to be blatant. And 9/11 is blatant. It is a massive, vulgar, mass communications exercise. So, to go back to your point about the small detail of the child's shoe, how do you focus in, in a way that absolutely refuses that mass communication element of it?

CLP: So it does become possible, but only via the tiny fragment?

RW: Yes, perhaps, perhaps. Via the tiny small shred, the tiny fragment. Yes, perhaps so.

CLP: DeLillo tried to describe the day itself, but most don't. Is that a way to represent it, to take a wide arc around it? Not to say we're covering it up but that we are saying it in a different way?

RW: Yes, I wouldn't object to the idea of taking a wide arc around the subject. There may be other ways of doing it, but that's one way, and another might be to go back to those children in the crèche that day, where I was. What would the day have been like from the point of view a five year old? Or a five-year-old's mother. And the five-year-old's mother who at 4 in the afternoon is finally reunited with the child who hasn't been heard of all day and wants to jump for joy, knowing that everyone else in the vicinity is paralyzed with horror and grief.

CLP: *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* focuses on a nine-year-old boy who at one stage wants to exchange his mother for his father who dies. It's difficult to read because it is about a terrible trade-off that some people must have wanted to make. Is there an element there of what you're describing?

RW: Yes, yes, that's it. Because it's humanizing, it's humanizing.

CLP: I know that you haven't read *Falling Man*, but DeLillo describes in that novel something called 'organic shrapnel', the means by which small fragments of victims' flesh are forced into the bodies of the living, making small bumps in their skin. Does that in any way inch towards a metaphor for your experience that day. That somehow the experience of those who died has somehow marked you, entered the consciousness, entered the heart?

RW: That's a very powerful metaphor I think. Very. I think it makes sense. Yes, that's right. And what I think of too, in metaphorical terms is of course the transplantation of someone else's flesh into your own is normally medically a good thing. But this isn't. Or at least... is it?